

Chapter 1

03/5/2014

"Hey dad, it's me Sarah." I drop the letter. Partially because the letter has today's date on it, but mostly because I don't have a daughter, but if I did, I would've called her Sarah.

"May 22nd 2008, the day you went to prom with Jennifer. April 6th 2010, the day you switched majors and became an engineer. February 22nd 2014, the day you bought this house. I'm sure right now you're justifying how someone could know these dates, but right now can you just trust me okay? I've written these to help you on your journey to find mom."

I put the letter down for a moment. I don't drop it, but I need a moment to think. I hadn't written those dates anywhere. I definitely hadn't written down the name of the girl I went to prom with. This didn't seem to be a scam. As long as this person didn't suggest I buy anything, I guess this was okay.

"Since you've decided this isn't a scam, I promise not to ask you to buy anything, and if I do, I'll keep the suggestions general like 'clothes that fit'. Now then, currently I'm your only child because you and mom split up." I have to stop again. I find out I probably get married and have a daughter cool enough to time travel, and then almost instantly find out it's all going to crash.

"I don't have you in my life anymore." Had I done something to prevent me from having custody of my daughter? Or had I just gambled and lost on custody rights in the court system? *"And I'm awful lonely without any brothers and sisters. Not to mention my new stepdad isn't anything like you."* I didn't know it was possible to hate someone you didn't know for something they hadn't done yet. *"I won't talk much about him, suffice it to say things are not healthy. So I'm going to help fix your life dad. My mom isn't perfect, but she's got her own letters, and when the time is right, you'll meet up."*

A nasty thought occurred to me. This could still be some elaborate joke, I wouldn't know until I met the woman probably, but if it was, my daughter could very well be erasing her own existence. I knew how reproductive possibilities worked, and the odds were basically zero of having the same sperm hit the same egg twice. I don't know if I want to do this, maybe it's not too late, maybe if I just put this box back it'll still all go the same. I'll still get divorced, but Sarah will still be alive. I take one last glance at the letter before finalizing my decision.

"I know you're now thinking that by sending you these I'm committing a kind of temporal suicide, and I accept that. I know that by your reading these, maybe by just reading this first letter, it's possible I've already written myself out of the timeline. If you and mom are happy together, and if you have your kids, then it was worth it. One last thing though, and I know there isn't any science for this, so bear with me, but I believe we're more than DNA. I believe there's something about us that you can't diagnose or identify with a thousand tests. I may not look like your Sarah, I may not even have all of her talents, but it'll still be me dad. Trust that it'll still be me."

Love,

Your daughter, Sarah

I put the letter back in the box and close the lid. I need a second to breathe. I have a daughter. I'm going to get married. I'm going to get divorced. My wife is going to get full custody of my daughter. Humanity will invent time travel, and then my daughter will try to retroactively fix my marriage.

Where do you even start to process that? I think I was excited. I have a daughter who as far as I can tell is very dedicated to her parents, and very intelligent. That's great! I had always had nagging doubts that I was sterile or would marry too late to have kids, and now all that was settled. I was excited to meet her!

Would I meet her though? I mean, what she said was poetic, but did it really work like that? I had better process that later, there was still the marriage and divorce to think about. My wife got custody, so I guess that means it was my fault. My wife still had her letters though, which meant there had to be things she was doing wrong too, so I shouldn't feel too guilty about it being me.

I sat down, I felt overwhelmed and I had barely begun to think about it. Okay, I'm an engineer, I organize and streamline things. I figure out how they work, and then pursue a solution. I would probably still be thinking about this years from now. I could spend years just thinking about the concept of time travel, much less all the personal stuff. I would have to whittle this ocean of information down to a few manageable glasses of water that I could actually swallow.

So first, I need to work on some things. I'm sure she'll help me out with exactly what. That must be what the other letters are for, things that she needs me to work on. I felt a warmth in my stomach at that thought. My daughter was such a good friend that she was willing to reach across time itself to help me.

I put my hand on the box that contains the letters. It's wooden, and I can feel all the little random divots and ravines in the wood. There are dozens of little imperfections that let me know it wasn't made with a machine. This was hand carved, or at the very least it was made with minimal machine work. I can't know this for sure, but I know she carved it, for me. She must know I always admired handmade items.

I shake myself. I need to focus or I'll get lost. Fact one, my daughter loves me. Fact two, she needs me to improve for her so that I can be a better husband, and probably a better father too. Fact three, she has written me instructions in these letters, which I should read.

Good, nice short list, all that time travel stuff was crazy, not to mention the ominous divorce, and the subsequent custody battle, but if I did what she asked I wouldn't have to worry about it. I would also get to talk with my daughter about time travel someday.

There was a little nagging doubt in the back of my head, like a fly that I just couldn't swat. The possibility remained that this was a very elaborate joke. Some local TV channel thought this was funny enough to put the effort in, but I didn't want to believe that. I wanted to believe that somewhere in the future there was a wonderful little girl who cared enough to write me all these letters, and dig into my past enough to know what to write. I wanted to believe it, so I did. I might have been crazy, but there was enough evidence in the first letter that I wasn't ready to question my sanity just yet. It also probably wouldn't matter, if these letters were for real, and they made me a better person, then the self-improvement would be worth the heartbreak.

Well, that was enough introspection for now, best to get started with these letters. If they were a joke it should come out pretty quick.

I empty the box and spread the letters out in front of me. It's an odd collection, counting the one I've already opened there are 18 in total. I fold the original up, and place it with the rest. They all have dates, so I line them up in chronological order, starting with the already opened letter.

Open this first

03/5/2014

03/11/2014

03/30/2014

04/09/2014

05/15/2014A

05/15/2014B

05/30/2014A

05/30/2014B

06/05/2014

06/09/2014

06/12/2014

06/19/2014

06/26/2014

07/03/2014

07/10/2014

10/17/2014

12/25/2017 7:53 PM

They mostly follow a pattern, with about 3 or 4 letters a month. That's good, most self-improvement plans I know followed a regular schedule. Then there were a couple oddities. Firstly, some of the letters were on the same day. There were two letters on the 15th of May, and 2 on the 30th of May. Huh, May must be an interesting month. There was also a letter with today's date on it. That would be interesting. Why would she write me two letters today? I would have to open that one next.

Another other oddity that sticks out to me is that the last two dates are so far apart from the rest. The first 16 letters are all within about 4 months of each other. The seventeenth is three months after the sixteenth, and the eighteenth is over three years after the seventeenth. Why the large distance. What could cause a need for such a large gap? Couldn't she at least have written me a few filler letters? Maybe something about her favorite book or movie? Maybe I shouldn't be greedy, she had

put a lot of work into this, but I got the suspicion I was supposed to open each letter on the date that was written on it, and I didn't like the idea of going so long without hearing from her.

Well, I got to hear from her at least one more time today. I had better go ahead and open the other letter with today's date on it.

03/5/2014

"Dad, I wonder what stuck out to you first. Was it the multiple letters in one day, or the large time gap of the last two letters?" My daughter knows me well. *"I can just see you now, with the letters all lined up in chronological order."*

Had she come back and watched me open the letters? I felt eyes on the back of my head and spun around. I see nothing but boxes. I pause to listen for a moment, but here nothing except the air conditioner running. I can't tell if she's really absent, or if she just knew I was going to turn my head, but either way I'm not going to find her at some point. I turn back to the letter. There's still an odd feeling of being watched, like an itch on the back of my neck, but I force myself not to scratch it.

"So does she know that I was going to turn my head around because she knows me really well? Or has she gone back and seen what I was going to do to so many times that she has my every move memorized? Lol, I should stop. I know you're now equal parts fond of me for getting inside your head so well, and creeped out that someone can map out your actions so thoroughly." It's a good kind of creeped out though.

"I hope you asked yourself why there were multiple letters on the same day first, because that's the question I'm going to answer." 'I hope' she says. Not, 'I know', so she hasn't memorized absolutely everything about me. *"As you've already suspected, you're supposed to open the letters only on the dates shown. I know it's going to take a lot of willpower to not open them all at once, but please dad, for me, only open them when it's time. For the ones on the same day, like these first two, you can open the first as early as you want. You can open it on midnight if you want, but wait for the second one, you'll know when the time is right."* That's vague. She knows I'm an engineer. I like precise things. I don't decide to run an experiment or perform a mechanical operation 'when the time is right' I do it as soon as the data tells me too. *"I know that sounds vague, but trust me, you opened this letter when I wanted you to."* That was it. The only way she could possibly have known when I opened the letter was if she had come back and watched me open it.

"Sarah." I call out. "If you can hear me, come out and talk to me. I'm your father and I want to talk to you." Silence, if she was here, she wasn't coming, and I might have to look around later, but if she knew when I was going to write things, then she probably knew where I would look. If I somehow randomized my search would that help? What if she had written this letter, and then just not come back this particular time. But did that mean she had traveled back multiple times? Man, my head was starting to hurt. I was not supposed to have to think about time like this. We are four dimensional beings, but one of those dimensions doesn't go backward.

This was getting to be too much. Maybe that was her goal; maybe she wanted to confuse me so I wouldn't question it as much. If that was the case, it was working.

“Now that I’ve thoroughly freaked you out, let’s both drop the time travel shenanigans. I promise to stop playing with your head so much, if you stop trying to find me. Deal?” Yeah right, like I’m going to give up on finding my time traveling daughter who’s delightfully witty and sharp as a tack. *“Well, maybe don’t give up on trying to find me entirely, but can you keep it to a minimum? If you try and find me I’m just going to go back and change what I did so you don’t find me next time anyway.”* I smiled. She had to have put that in there because I found her a couple times and she had to go back and change it. *“So go ahead and smile because you know I would only say that if you found me, and let’s move on with this letter.”*

“Now then, you remember a couple paragraphs ago where I talked about the letter? I’m not sure the message got through here, we kind of got side tracked with the whole time travel thing, which was cool, but I really just wanted to make 3 points with this letter. 1- Don’t open a letter until the date written on the letter. 2-For the couple of letters that are written on the same day, you’ll know when to open them. 3- I’m not going to tell you why the last two are so far apart or why the very last one also has the time you have to open it. You’ll just have to wait and see. Once you read the letters, this will all make sense. So, as you can see, that’s it for today. I know you’re reeling from all this information and you need some time for it to sink in. This is the main reason why the letters are spaced so far out. If you try to do everything that I’m writing about all at once, it won’t sink in properly. You aren’t like a car. I can’t tell you what the problems are, and then you’ll just take a couple hours to fix it. These are life changes that take time. Even with all the extra motivation of having your future daughter cheering you on, these things take time. Right now, if you opened the next one, you’d just spend the next week or two thinking about time travel and it wouldn’t sink in. Believe me dad, I’ve done my homework. Only open the letters when the time is right. I’ll give you a hint for the next one. What does everyone have, but no one wants, and dies without.”

She makes riddles too! I wanted to get this framed so I could prove to all my friends how smart my daughter is. Or maybe I should say how smart my daughter ‘will be’, not ‘is’, or wait, maybe it was ‘is’. How did tense work for time travelers? Because she isn’t born, but she might be here, I wonder if there are inter-temporal grammar Nazis that sort out these kinds of things.

I wanted to read through the letter again. If I had to wait almost a week for the next one, then I should get as much mileage out of the two I had already opened. I pick up the original, but then I think of all the moments when I was reading it that she knew what I was thinking, or played with my mind. That wouldn’t happen on a second read through. I already knew what I would read. Maybe at a later date I could go through again for nostalgia’s sake, but something tells me at least for these first two, I’m only supposed to read through them once.

I feel a sense of loss as I pack up the letters and put them back in the chest, taking a few moments to admire the craftsmanship once again, before closing the lid. It’s like when you say goodbye to a good friend, when the time has gone too fast and you really want to stay for just a few more moments to talk about that one last thing, or when you leave a movie theater after watching the last movie in an epic series. When I was reading the letter it was as if my daughter was there with me. Especially with all the time travel business meaning she very well could have been, but now that the box is in another room, I’m alone again.

The attic had been the last stop in my walk through of the house. I had walked through it several times in the buying process, but this was my first walk through after getting everything settled in. All the

furniture was in place, everything was on the proper shelf or cabinet, and I had wanted to admire my handiwork. I went to my kitchen and picked out some leftover Chinese carryout from the move in.

I go and sit in my living room, watching a clock on the wall tick away the seconds. Part of me wanted to go get sleeping pills and just knock myself out for the next six days. I couldn't wait to see what she had written to me in the next letter.

The time for the next week passed slowly. The project that I was working on with my job as a government contractor just needed some final touches, and none of my friends were in town. My family might have wanted to do stuff to take my mind off things, but I never knew what to talk about around them, so instead I just buried myself in a couple seasons of a show that was just put online. Thank goodness for streaming TV. I didn't know how people survived without it.

While watching some of the less intellectual shows I zone out and think about the riddle. *Everyone has it, but no one wants it, and you die without it.* I assumed, based on the letters, she meant all of those things literally. Which meant it was probably a body part if everyone had it, and you died it without it. I could maybe see it being something highly essential like air, food, or shelter. The trouble with those was not everyone did have them, at least not all the time, and certainly everyone wanted them. That definitely meant it was a body part.

What body part did people not want? Couldn't be a limb, those were too useful. Anything on the face was out, eyes, ears, nose, those were all too essential. Did acne count as a body part? No one wanted that. I glanced at my reflection in a window and poked a white head. That was a little bit of a fault, but certainly nothing to write a letter that spanned time about.

Couldn't be any of the vital organs, what did no one want in their body? As soon as I say that in my head I know what it must be. I can't believe my daughter is going to lecture me on it, but there's only one thing it could be. I run my hand through my hair mournfully as I finish watching my show. 03/11/2014 cannot come soon enough.

When the day finally comes, I decide to wait until after work to open it. Just in case it involves immediately doing a lot of work. As soon as I get home from the office I practically jumped up my stairs into the attic, and nearly hit my head on several exposed beams as I make a dash for the box. I take out the first two letters that I've already read, remembering fondly what it was like to have my daughter play with my head during my last session with the box, and take out the third letter.

03/11/2014

"Enjoy binge watching your favorite TV shows?" This letter was taking a judgmental turn straight away, but I already knew what she was getting at, and had expected this. *"How much weight did you gain watching that show? I'm sure you've done the math at some point. I hate to start out a letter like this, but there's going to be a lot of tough love in these letters dad, so you might as well get used to it now."* There were going to be more times where she decided to point out a bunch of my flaws? Great. *"As you've already guessed, the answer to my riddle is fat. You've got a bit too much of it dad, and it's*

only going to get worse. If you're going to take care of me and mom, we've got to get you into better shape. I know, I know. She went through all this trouble just to tell me to lay off the cheeseburgers, and hit the gym a little more? Well, yes, it's unclimactic, but it's true. Trust me, we'll get to the more fun stuff later, but this comes first. Once you see what the next steps are you'll understand why we've started her. So, here's how this works. You need to rack up a 3500 calorie deficit to lose one pound. Here's the interesting part. That next letter? You're not allowed to open it until you've dropped ten pounds. That's 35,000 calories dad, and all that's before you start working out. Otherwise you're going to damage your joints too badly in the next part. You have 19 days to drop 35,000 calories. You're a smart guy. You can figure this out. If you don't drop the weight you might as well burn these letters. 19 days, 35,000 calories down, that's 1842 calories down a day, or this conversation is over. On 03/18/2014 turn this letter over and read what's on the back."

This was much shorter, much less fun, and much more brutal than I had expected. I knew she was going to talk about my weight, but drop some pounds or we're done talking? I could add ruthless to her list of qualities. I put the letter in the box and close the lid. I don't feel the same sense of loss as I did last time.

Before I descended to my living room I wondered how serious her threat was. I knew what she was asking would hurt, a lot, and would probably turn me into a rather unpleasant person. Most weight loss professionals I knew would call this a crash diet, and I knew crash diets were dangerous. I guess if she was suggesting a crash diet she knew my body could take it, but if I didn't do it, how could she enforce her ultimatum?

Until now I thought her messages were going to be passive. I hadn't see her, as far as I could tell she had just time traveled for informational purposes, and the only trace of her journeys was the box itself. Would she steal the box if I opened a letter too early? Was she somehow watching the box to know when I opened the letters? I felt eyes on the back of my neck again, and decided my attic looked a little too unfriendly. I had better head downstairs.

I decide I can't know for sure if she'll enforce it or not, but for now I had better take her at her word. She can time travel after all, who knows what else she's capable of.

For now I'm willing to give this a shot. How hard can it be? A couple of internet searches later I realize that making that kind of a calorie deficit means I'm allowed to have about 4 fairly plain protein heavy sandwiches a day, need to drink a bunch of water, and I would have to take vitamin supplements to make sure my body didn't run out of necessary vitamins and minerals.

Okay, so maybe it wouldn't be so easy. Well, better not do this halfway. I make my way to my fridge and open it. Time to throw away all the unhealthy stuff, I start taking out individual items and looking at their backs. American cheese, 100 calories per slice. Wow, just 1 slice? That was depressing. The bread was only about 250 calories, and that would be most of my calories for the day with just four of those. I pitch the cheese into the trash can.

Alright, how about chicken nuggets, how many of those can I have? 60 calories a nugget!?! No way, a single plate of nuggets would max me out for the day. I was no longer entirely certain my daughter wasn't trying to kill me.

How about condiments, ketchup is basically tomatoes, those are healthy right? Nope, that was going to tack on another 2 or 3 chicken nuggets worth of calories to put that on something.

Was there anything worth eating in my fridge? The short answer was no, no there wasn't. The longer answer required a trip or two outside to throw away the full trash bags I generated.

Already regretting my decision to do this I head on to the internet for a solution. Several very depressing fitness forum searches later I have a very boring plan that consists of a lot of fruits, vegetables, and brown rice. I manage to find a way to sneak in some tasty sauce and a little white meat chicken into the rice, but its little comfort.

The trip to the grocery store is highly masochistic. I have to walk past isles of potato chips, precooked ribs, ice cream, and soda in order to get all of my items, and it's like walking past a bunch of friends. I want to stop and say hi, but I know if I do I'm going to leave with more than I came for. As I check out, and sign for my debit card, it's like signing a ticket to the middle of a desert.

People who never have to know what a large calorie deficit is like are lucky. There are the hunger pains that come and go between meals. There's the knowledge that even when you finish a meal you won't truly be full. You start noticing how often people you know just seem to throw 500 extra calories onto a meal like it's nothing. People actually open cans of soda without having an existential crisis.

Then there's the more subtle psychological effects. You don't go out to lunch with coworkers, and when your friends go out to eat, you have to pass. Your social life dwindles, and to top it all off, you get cranky. Your body doesn't like not being fed, and it makes sure you feel its unhappiness.

After a week of hunger I decide to order a pizza. I don't care. I haven't see any more proof that I really do have a time traveling daughter, and it's not like she's going to weigh me and find out how much weight I've lost, and even if she traveled back in time, was she really watching me every single waking moment? One pizza couldn't be that bad. I could keep it in the fridge and have a couple slices every now and then. Who does she think she is anyway? I'm her father. I should be the one dictating the rules to her, and why would she set such a ridiculous mandate? A mandate that could only be achieved with a crash diet. This was dumb. I am an adult. I shouldn't have anyone dictate to me what I should be doing with my own body.

Once the call for pizza has been made, I remember her letter, and how it said to turn it over at some point. I had a few minutes, and I think the day was today. Maybe she could find out what I was going to do, and put some gloating words on the back because she knew this was the day I was going to fail.

I head up to the attic and before I head over to the chest I look around the attic to see if there are any bugs planted. I'm not sure what I'm looking for, so I feel around suspicious looking holes in the rafters, and get my phone out to look in the head of the air conditioner unit to see if there is anything hidden inside.

She could have some super small future tech camera, but if she does, I can't find it. As far as I can tell my attic is clean.

When my search is completed, I open the box and find the third letter 03/11/2014. I skip to the bottom and see the date I should flip it. It is in fact today's date, so I flip the letter over.. On the back is written a short statement.

"I love you dad, and I believe in you."

I see a mental image of a little six year old girl signing a letter. I know she must be an adult, but for some reason, reading that sentence, I think of her as a little girl.

I fold the letter back up and stick it in the box. I feel guilty. Moments before I had been dead set on violating this girl's request, I had already called the pizza. It should be here in a few minutes. She must've known what I was going to do. I wasn't completely sure how this time travel thing worked, but I was sure she must've known. I had expected to find some harsh words chastising me, and instead of condemnation. I find forgiveness. She had been willing to cut off communication for the sin I was still partially in the act of committing, and she forgave it without a second thought.

When the pizza arrives, I ask the guy if he wants it, and throw what he doesn't eat away. It is absolutely no trouble maintaining my diet until 03/30/2014.

When the day finally arrives I head up the attic stairs with a mixture of fear and reverence. The amount of power this person has over me is sinking in. They really know exactly how to press my buttons, and got me to accomplish the crazy goal of dropping ten pounds in 19 days. Someone who can do that can make me do any number of things.

I feel reverence because the source of that power is my love for her. It's kind of corny, and it's kind of weird loving someone that much when your link to them is weak, but it's there. I suddenly lend a lot more credence to stories I've heard about parents hulk lifting cars to save their kids.

I open the box, and pull out the fourth letter.

03/30/2014

"Oh daddy, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you! I can't believe you did it! That was so incredible. I knew you could do it! And you did it for me too!" I could just see her jumping up and down, eagerly clapping her hands. *"This next part won't be so hard I promise, but before I tell you what it is, you have to promise me something. I already know who my mom is, and I don't want you dating any women except her. Call me selfish, but you need to be ready for when she shows up, and you don't yet know which of these letters is going to be the one where I set you two up. So no chasing numbers, unless I tell you ;), and if you get a number you don't call them back. Got it? Great, now that we've got that down, it's time to start making you more attractive. It's time to start exercising! I happen to know a little bit about getting into shape, so here's what you're going to do."*

The letter went on to detail how exactly I was going to get into shape, along with a diet that included a much increased calorie count. It's rough, but it wasn't as hard as dropping ten pounds. As I start taking walks and doing calisthenics, I think about what the next letter contains.

It felt good to hear my daughter's praise, and it felt even better because I had earned it. The exercise did hurt, but it wasn't nearly as unpleasant as the crash diet had been, and I loved the results I was starting to see.

I got an extra bit of motivation from the women I ran in to on my walks. I saw several, and got some second glances that were most gratifying. My daughter hadn't said anything about smiling and exchanging some cheerful words with appreciative women, and it made working out even more fun. There was one girl with long brown hair I bumped into on occasion who was very nice to me.

As the date for the next letter draws nearer I'm becoming more and more curious about what it contains. I have it nailed down to two possibilities. Either it's the fun thing that she hinted would follow in one of her earlier letters, or it's some sort of joke. I considered that it might be some kind of encouragement, like the letter in the middle of the crash diet, but I couldn't imagine what she could encourage me about.

I had built up to a 4 mile walk on 04/08/2014, and was thinking about opening the letter at midnight, or perhaps first thing in the morning, when something happened to take my mind off things. A woman who gave me a particularly meaningful glance stopped a few paces ahead of me, and gave me a very obvious head to toe look. I'm a little off put by her forwardness, but smile as I start to walk past her.

Her head tracks me as I go by, and she quickly fishes a piece of paper out of her pocket and hands it to me. I almost trip as I take it from her, and say a mumbled "Thanks." Before walking on.

A girl just gave me her number? That never happened. I get half a block away before I realize she doesn't have mine, and I dash back to hastily write down my number on another piece of paper. I'm thankful that I have a couple pens and scraps of paper from the office in my pockets.

I'm so shocked by the unexpected rapid exchange of numbers that it's not until I get home that I realize I've almost broken my daughter's trust, again by having this lady's phone number. I haven't called her back, so I haven't technically broken her trust just yet. I just have to not dial her number, and I'll most likely be okay. I tear up the piece of paper to make sure I can't slip and call her in a weak moment.

There, now I'm safe. I can read the next letter with a clean conscience. I still have several hours to midnight, and I spend them looking at my phone. While I'm cooking my nightly whole grain rice with sweet and sour chicken, and assembling the side dishes of carrots and celery I keep my phone propped up in the kitchen to see if she calls.

It won't break my promise to my daughter if I get a call from her. As long as I don't return it my daughter will be happy with me.

After I eat dinner I keep my phone on the arm of my chair as I watch TV. I bet the girl who I gave my number to was just sitting down to relax herself. I should probably get a call any minute now.

After a couple hour long episodes I turn off the TV and start heading towards the bathroom. Did I write the number correctly? Maybe I smudged an eight into a nine by mistake. I had a couple eights in my number, it could get confusing.

After I've showered, and taken care of my teeth, I start to wonder if her phone is broken. Once I've cleaned my room, taken out the trash, watered the grass, trimmed my toenails, washed all of my computer monitors, defragged my hard drive, and done a load of laundry, I knew she wasn't calling.

I couldn't imagine why she wasn't calling. She had started this whole charade. Had she been intentionally leading me on? What kind of person just hands out numbers and then doesn't call. I scrub an entire floor to vent my anger, and when I ascend into the attic after midnight I'd advanced from anger to depression.

I didn't get to interact with girls very often, at least I didn't before I had started exercising, and this was the first time one had actually given me her number. It felt silly being hurt by someone who I had only met in passing, but it hurt all the same.

04/09/2014

"I'm sorry dad. I know she was a jerk. I wish I could've done something to prevent her from leading you on, but I'm already risking a lot by doing what I'm doing for you. I can't directly interfere with other people like that. It's just too dangerous. I can say that she wasn't my mom, and that it wouldn't have worked out anyway. I know it hurts, but it's for the best dad. I'm also sorry to say that the next couple of weeks are going to be more of the same, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Your daughter knows what you like, and I know I'm going to put a spring in your step when I tell you we're going to start turning you into a genuine manly man with the next letter. How you ask? We're going to make things burn."

Chapter 2

Make things burn she said. My daughter was certainly a complicated individual. She was protective of my talking to other women, stern with enforcing my faithfulness to my diet, playful in her mastery of time travel. She demonstrated high emotional intelligence in her perceptiveness of me, and was very supportive of my successes, as well as understanding of my failures. Now I could add mildly psychotic to her list of character traits.

Make things burn? She was once again being intentionally vague to maximize the affect it had on me. What could that mean? She had been keeping to literal definitions, so I assumed actual flames were going to be involved. I tended to avoid fire. Fire was dangerous. I paid good money in my taxes so that well trained men could come and destroy fires within minutes of pressing a few buttons on a phone. I had a fire extinguisher too, just in case they didn't get here quick enough.

I would have to wait over a month to find out, which seemed cruel to me. She was intentionally leading me on to mess with my head. Whenever I went out for a walk or jog, or even just some light callisthenic work, I thought of her. At my job I had formulas and paperwork to fill my one track mind, but out in the open air, my mind was free to wander, and it always wandered to her. Every time I weighed myself, and saw another pound drop, or I added another mile onto my jogging route, I said a quiet thank you to her. It was all easy knowing that somehow, she knew I was doing it. I never saw her, and I still couldn't know for certain she was personally watching me, but I knew somewhere, some-when, she was proud of me.

Time travel was also a frequent topic of my mental discussions. It had occurred to me that it was possible she hadn't come back by herself at all. I didn't see her, and while there certainly explanations for that, the most obvious was that she simply wasn't here. She could have sent back some kind of tiny remote control robots that looked like flies, or perhaps she had come back, planted a number of devices, and then left.

As far as I could tell she hadn't physically done anything besides writing the letters and putting them in a box in the attic, but she didn't necessarily have to come back for that. There could be portals or something that just dropped things. Like a tele-porter, but one that worked on times in addition to places. She could've used that same tele-porter to plant the bugs that she watched me with. Those bugs could then relay the messages forward in time and she could use the information to write the letters and send those back.

Wait, would she have to send them back multiple times then? Because these letters seemed to know not only what I was going to do, but how the changes would affect me. Did she need to plant the bugs multiple times? Or did the transmission from the bugs change whenever she sent a letter. If so, did she send all of the letters all at once? Or had she sent them one at a time, observed the change her letter had made, and then written the next letter accordingly? Or could all of this just be total blind luck on her part?

My head was starting to hurt from thinking about the fourth dimension. I resolved my internal argument by going to a hardware store and buying a metal detector. If she was using some devices to watch me, there had to be some in the attic, and they probably had metal in them.

On June fifteenth I grabbed my new metal detecting toy and ventured into the attic. I took a good look at things as I first entered, making careful note of how everything lay. I tried to form a mental picture, so that if anything changed I would know. Then I realized I lived in the 21st century, and took a couple actual pictures with my phone.

Shaking my head at myself I then brought out my metal detector and started to go through the attic. There were a lot of nails, so my plan did not work out too well because the detector was basically always beeping. Disappointed at my failed attempt to foil my daughter I switch off the useless hunk of junk and open the chest. I rifle through it and pick out the sixth letter

05/15/2014A

"Lol dad, did you really think I'd let a metal detector spoil my fun?" The little stinker sure was proud of herself. *"I'm insulted. It's futile anyway. The only way you're going to find me is if you do what's written in these letters. They're my trail of bread crumbs."* She was right, but that wasn't going to stop me from trying. *"I know this isn't going to be the last time we do this little dance, and honestly I wouldn't have it any other way. I just wanted to let you know I'm going to win :P."* She actually wrote the emoticon. I brush the ink with a finger and smile. I think her playful side is my favorite.

"Alright, enough chit chat, I know you've been wondering what my cryptic message from last time meant. It's pretty straight forward actually. You're going to learn how to camp, and that means

starting fires.” I moaned. Man had invented the mattress for a reason. I hadn’t spent a night outside in my life.

“Now don’t get all whiny on me. You’re a big boy. You can handle a little nature, and you’ve got a little extra money from all that bad food you’re not eating, so you can afford to spend a little money on camping gear.” She wrote a list of equipment that included a sleeping bag, skewers, a tent, a sleeping pad, a backpack, a flint and steel, and hot dogs. She had even included a pricing list with brand names and models, probably just to show off. *“Well, what are you waiting for dad? You’re sleeping outside tonight, and you’re not going to use your kitchen. You better leave for the store. Get going! Oh, and youtube how to start a fire.”* This was making things burn? I felt kind of gyped. It was a good thing she had written two letters for me to read today. Maybe that second letter had something more to do with making things burn.

I resolved to read the second letter after I had made my dinner. I checked my watch. I had better get moving, I think the sun set in about two hours, and I wanted some daylight to work with. I could camp out in my miniscule backyard, but I didn’t have any flashlights. So I had to move quickly.

I did the highly irresponsible thing and watched fire starting videos at redlights and stop signs, then googled tent information as I walked through the outdoors store picking up equipment. The clerk thought I was rather rude for not making eye contact, but I was playing with my daughter. She wasn’t physically there, but just like when I exercised, it felt like she was.

In under an hour I’m sitting in my backyard with a bundle of stuff I’ve never used before, and a small pile of twigs and pine needles. I took a few extra minutes to clear a patch of ground and form a ring of stones for a fire pit, and I was ready to go.

Setting up the wood and pine needles was easy. First I made a nest out of pine needles and very small twigs. Next I formed a small teepee of twigs, then a larger teepee around that, and a larger one around that. I had other wood next to my makeshift fire pit that I would throw on when the fire got going. I left an opening in the three teepees so I could put my nest in the middle once I got a little flame going.

Now for the hard part, getting the next to catch fire. Everything else was trivial. I knew if I just threw wood onto the fire it would be fine, and I was positive I could setup the tent and cook a meal. The trick was I needed either light or heat to do all those things. That meant fire, which meant getting a spark. It suddenly made sense why my daughter said this was about making things burn, once you had fire, the rest wasn’t hard at all.

Sarah had thrown down a gauntlet, and I was going to beat her challenge with flying colors. With a sense of determination I pulled out my flint and steel. It looked like a key chain. Only instead of multiple keys there was just one key, and a stick of metal. I was supposed to scrape the key along the metal rod, and that would make sparks.

It seemed simple enough. I spent the first ten minutes trying different angles, speeds, and scraping different parts of the rod until I got my first spark. Great, now I just needed to land that spark on the nest and it would all go up in flames right? Sparks were not as hot as I thought they were, it took another forty minutes until I saw some smoke come out of my little bundle of pine needles and twigs.

People used to do this every night for dinner? I hadn't even started the fire, and I would have to wait another ten or twenty minutes for it to get hot enough to cook with. Finally, after throwing away the fire starter in frustration twice, and having to go and find it in the dark, because the sun was rapidly setting, I was not as good at estimating sun down as I thought it was, I got a little flame. Then, in my subsequent leap of joy, I stamped the fire out and spent another ten minutes getting it going again.

Finally, after almost an hour of striking a metal rod with a key I created a decent fireball that I could hold in my hand. I made sure not to celebrate until I had placed it in the middle of my teepee configuration, and the wood started to catch fire.

Then I leaned my head back and gave a whoop of joy. I had created fire! I was all that was man! I could keep this flint and steel in the trunk of my car and would always be able to cook meat or scare off wild animals or whatever else you did with fire. To start, I was going to cook myself a well-deserved meal. Then I was going to go read the little stinkers next letter and see if I could manage to gloat somehow.

The hotdogs were plain, without buns, and I managed to either burn, or undercook every single one, but they tasted like victory to me.

After wolfing down several badly cooked hot dogs I strode inside to get the letter. I took it out of the box and went back outside. I was going to read this letter next to my very own, self-made fire. With the crackling flames providing me over the shoulder light, I opened the seventh letter.

05/15/2014B

"Daddy, did you really think your daughter was going to leave you hanging with some old school tech?" Admittedly it had been underwhelming using such ancient materials at first, but the more I had pursued the cave man fire making thing the more I had gotten into it. There really was something to this making something from scratch with your own two hands. I was proud of my little fire. *"Don't get me wrong. I love your little fire."* I glanced up briefly to see if she was watching, but I was beginning to get used to her little tricks, and I quickly returned to her letter. *"And I love how you still look when I say things like that, but I had some more..... Interesting options for you."* What followed was a how to guide for making several substances which I was quite sure were illegal. My eyes bulged when I saw that they could all be manufactured with rudimentary household items that basically everyone has access to. *"Now the next time you get to start a fire, it'll be a lot quicker, and a lot more interesting. I'd recommend staying away from the more explosive list."* No kidding, some of this stuff just burned, but some of it looked like it could take down my house with just a pound or two.

How did she know all this? I hoped it was because my little girl was either a chemical engineer, or an avid internet server, and not because she was part of some resistance band that was trying to overthrow our robot overlords with makeshift weapons and bombs.

"Don't worry about how I know all this, but do worry how you're going to spend the night out here daddy, because until you read my next letter, you're sleeping outside. K, got to go, love you! PS- No sleeping pad."

That's it? No explanation? I was beginning to think there really was no reason for her ridiculousness. Or perhaps fighting our robot overlords really had taken over and I would have to spend a lot of nights outside under the stars.

I fold up the letter, and mournfully put my sleeping pad aside. It shouldn't be that bad. The sleeping bag should be sufficient for one night on the ground. After returning both the letter and the sleeping pad to their appropriate places I pitch my tent. It's not difficult. There are instructions, and I think I'd have to return my master's degree if I couldn't pitch a simple tent. The sun has already set, so I make sure my phone has enough to charge to last another day or two, set an alarm, and coil up in my sleeping bag.

Now in my head, at this point I figured I should be drifting off to sleep. I did not figure what it would feel like to sleep on the ground without a pad. It shouldn't have been that bad, but it felt sleeping on a tile floor that someone had spilled a bunch of small rocks on. I couldn't believe how sensitive I was to the things! Every time I closed my eyes I could instantly picture where every single stone was boring into my body. Whether it was the size of a thumbnail, or a whole fist, it all felt horrible. I don't know how people managed this back in the day. Did they just not have nerves on their backsides?

I lay my head down at about nine, but I don't fall asleep until closer to 11:30. I just toss and turn, while fantasizing wildly about laying down on a nice smooth, rock free mattress.

When I finally do fall asleep I have dreams about being prodded and tossed about by large rock shaped monsters. I've never been so relieved to hear an alarm go off in my life. I thank every luck star I have on the drive to work that I'm not sleeping on the ground right now. The fire starting was a cake walk next to sleeping on the ground.

Then a funny thing happened when I got to my cubicle at work. I found myself sitting at my desk, and I discovered my chair was actually comfortable. My desk had some sort of plastic economical chair that came from some discount office warehouse. They were curved in a way that no one who had even heard of basic human anatomy would possibly curve a chair. These kinds of chairs were designed to keep workers like myself uncomfortable so we wouldn't get sleepy. For all that, it was way softer than hard mother earth, and it didn't have a single rock in it. I laid back and actually relaxed in the thing. I was pretty sure I could take a nap in it.

"I swear they showed the blind neanderthal that designed these things a sea slug when he asked what a human looked like." One of my coworkers three cubes down declares. I smile. Yesterday I would've agree with him. Yesterday I would've been frowning and cursing modern industrial engineering. Yesterday I hadn't spent a night on the ground. Today I had, and today, instead of griping, I was smiling. I got more work done by lunch time that day than I typically got in an entire day.

When I get home that night I see my camping setup outback. I hadn't had time to take it down this morning. Before I go on my walk I go out and inspect the tent. I had zipped it up, so no wild animals had gotten inside. I lay down in my sleeping bag to see if it's as uncomfortable as I remember.

It's bad. It still feels like some bizarre take on Chinese water torture, but it's not as bad as last time. I get up and go for a jog.

For the next two weeks between letters I sleep on the ground every night, and make a fire to cook my food. I become a master of lean-tos, scout fires, I even make a fire while it's raining once. I had to use one of the illegal substances my daughter suggested, but it still counts.

While trying out a new kind of fire configuration that I think will maximize the amount of light I get from the flames, I think about the next letter. So far almost all of the letters have been challenging things. This next one probably would be too. If I get a sneak peak of it, that could give me an edge in completing the next task. I could do some prep work, buy a few things, research a few things. If this was really about self-improvement then surely knowing what I was going to get into should help the process along.

The problem is of course that she'll know. Of that I have no doubt. She's already predicted every step I'm going to take before I take it, but then again I've been making it easy on her. I always opened the letters on the day she wanted me too. What if that was part of it. If I opened one too early would that let me get around this temporal sorcery?

I think of the letter she sent me when I almost broke my diet. This should be a girl I trust. Then again, she's playful and witty too, and I bet she loved matching wits with a worthy opponent. Wouldn't she be thrilled if I could manage to outsmart her? And wouldn't she be disappointed if I didn't try?

That was it, I should take a look at the letters. It'd be fun. As much as she protested me trying to figure her out, I could tell that was part of the fun for her. Let's see what the little sprite had in store for me this time. I went into the attic and took out the seventh letter

05/23/2014, wait, that wasn't right. The date on the cover of the letter was a week from today. The date on the inside of the letter should match.

"I'm sure you expected a witty response here, but the truth is I'm disappointed." So much for a fun little game with my daughter. She can't be disappointed. I'm the parent. I was the one who was supposed to be disappointed. "Look at yourself dad, haven't I earned your trust? You've lost twenty pounds, gotten into triathlon shape, and started becoming a man's man. Why did you open this letter?" That wasn't fair. She didn't get to ask why. She knew why, didn't she? "There are many parts of your life I've looked into and figured out, but I haven't looked into why you haven't trusted me, because I don't want to know. I don't know what made you break my request and open this early, but I hope it was worth it."

I crumbled the edges of the letter in my hands, forcibly preventing myself from doing more. *"And before you think this is some needless guilt trip, let me tell you it's not father. Your next letter is going to require a lot of strength to accomplish, and you're still too heavy and not strong enough for it." This letter was really laying the hurt on. "I didn't want you to open it until a week from now because you need one more week of strength and weight loss. I didn't want to have to call you weak or overweight unless I absolutely had to, and if you had just waited I wouldn't have had to. More importantly than that, the next letter is going to require a lot of trust, and your breach of that trust just now is going to make it harder. I still love you daddy, you'll hear from me in another week."*

There are a number of things in life that only take a second or two to do, but the negative repercussions last for days or weeks. As soon as I had read that first sentence I knew that I had made a lasting mistake. She was right. I shouldn't have tested her. Now I would spend the following week hoping that I was ready to take the next step. I wasn't even halfway yet. I couldn't mess this up now.

To add insult to injury for the next week I have to dodge texts and phone calls from my parents. There are some big events coming up, graduation ceremonies or something, and I had to focus on the tasks at hand. I redoubled my efforts to become who my daughter needed me to be. I redo my diet to make sure it is completely optimized for weight loss and muscle gain. I add distance to my runs, and start doing my calisthenics with weights. I'm not going to disappoint her again.

I climb the steps to the ladder with purpose when it's time to read the next letter. I will redeem myself this time. I open the chest and extract the eighth letter.

05/30/2014

"I want you to know, I don't blame you for this last week. You've had a lot on your mind, and it wasn't your fault." What, what was she talking about? I really didn't want this to be another downer letter. *"But that's not what this letter is about, this letter is about letting go, and also becoming a mountain man."* So back country backpacking? That seemed the next logical step. You needed to be in good shape to do it, and it was basically the next difficulty level above just regular camping.

"It's not back country back packing. That would be cool, and we should totally do that when I grow up! But for right now you're going to learn something less time consuming, but much more dangerous. Father, you are going to embrace your inner action hero, and go jumping off of a mountain into thin air, with nothing but a solid rope, sturdy knots, and an iron grip to prevent you from falling to your death. Father, you're going to learn solo rock climbing." What followed was a highly detailed set of instructions on how to setup a rock climbing system, and rappel down by yourself. With some of her other letters she had told me to look things up or figure things out, with this letter she spelled everything out herself. She even revealed a hidden compartment in the chest that contained pictures, diagrams, and specifications for the ropes. I felt foolish for scouring this attic for clues, even getting a metal detector, but I hadn't thought to check the chest for clues. She concluded the letter with the following message.

"Dad, up until now you haven't really had to trust me. You've sacrificed for me. I don't want to belittle that. I know that a lot of what I have asked has been hard, but this is the first time, and I promise the only time, where you're really going to directly put your own life in my hands. I wrote out exactly what I wanted you to do myself, because I want you to trust me." Did I not trust her when she was an adult? Was that why she was doing this? Or did I not trust my wife. I shuddered to think what I had done that would require me to break myself of this personality fault in such a drastic way.

“I will say it again. I promise never to ask this of you again, but I am going to ask it this one time. I’ve made sure that these instructions will keep you safe. I’ve checked, double checked, and used them myself. They will make sure you don’t get hurt. Just think of me dad, and make a leap of faith.”

I go over the instructions, and then go over the instructions again. Then I go over them a third time, and reread the last time sentence in the letter ‘Just think of me dad, and make a leap of faith’. There would be no going back from this one. I had no experience with this sort of thing. As far I knew, these could be instructions for very fancy shoe lace tying.

I think of all she’s done for me. Every single step has made me a better, stronger, more confident person. I like who she’s shaping me into, and she has guided my footsteps deftly, knowing every step and miss step I would take. It was time to figure out just how far this could go.

There are no eager and rapid internet searches this time as I purchase the necessary equipment. Looking up more information would betray her trust again. She didn’t need to write it for me to know. I’ve broken her trust once, I would redeem myself.

Once I’ve bought and assembled all the gear, and there is a good bit of it, I start up my nightly camp fire and prepare for bed. There isn’t enough daylight to do what she is asking. So I go to bed that night dreaming of great heights, and great falls.

She wrote me the letter on a Friday, so I have the whole weekend to do what she asks. On one of the extra pieces of paper she had stowed away in the secret compartments she included a map to some rock climbing locations. I had brought all the hidden papers with me, and now consulted the map. I checked the coordinates on the map with the GPS on my phone, and found the location it led to was not far from here, only a few miles drive. Who knew I had rock climbing locations so close by?

I’m not thinking of time travel or what the next letter contains as I load up my car with my new thrill seeking toys, as well as a bunch of energy bars and water. The system doesn’t look like it will take more than an hour to set up, even with all the knots I was going to have to learn. But I want to take a long time to make sure I was going to get it right.

She wasn’t joking about putting my life in her hands. I didn’t have a second source of information to check her facts against, and I didn’t bring any friends or hire some mountain climbing professional to check my work. I was going to live or die by her hand.

On the drive out I don’t turn on the radio or play an audiobook on my phone. I just watch the terrain. On the walk up to the cliff, as I make my way through the forest, there aren’t any people, which is fine, because right then the silence is fitting. I arrive at the top of the cliff and drop my gear a few dozen feet from the edge. I want to take a look before I start setting up.

The edge of the cliff is a very sharp looking thing. About where I’m standing the dirt and roots of the forest give way to solid rock, and about twenty feet in front of me the ground just stops, like it was cut off with a knife. As I approach it I appreciate how final a cliff edge looks. It feels like an end. I crouch with my toes almost sticking into open air, and peer over the edge.

Far, it looks far, but my science oriented brain won't be happy with such an inexact measurement. I pick up a rock and gently toss it over the side. One one thousand, two one thousand, thunk. It takes two seconds to hit the bottom. That might not have sounded too bad if I didn't know that meant the cliff was a little over 60 feet high. A fall from this height was a one way trip.

This isn't helping, I'm only going to psyche myself out if I stay here, so I remove Sarah's instructions from my pocket and get to work. It's slow going at first, there are only a couple of knots you need to know, but each requires several tries to get right, and there's a lot of measuring and re-measuring. I have to untie and retie one specific knot 5 times before the system looks right. It's not a terribly elegant looking thing, but it works. I tug on every single knot and rope several times as hard as I can to make sure it's not going to fail as soon as it's supporting my body weight. As far as I could tell this thing was going to support me. Then again, when I was thirty feet down the cliff I would be applying a lot of torque due to the distance and stretch factor in the rope, not to mention the possibility of falling a few feet and generating even more force. I wish I had some tools from the lab to test the strength of this rope.

I take a few paces back and look at the system again, hoping its appearance from a new angle will somehow make what I'm about to do easier. I'm going to tie myself into the system, take a piece of the rope in my hand, along with a small little metal device that looks like it could open bottles, and jump off a cliff.

Nope, looking at it from a few feet away didn't help one iota. I'm going to need some help with this one. I really wish Sarah was here now. I didn't know why she was insisting on keeping this distance between us. Couldn't she say what she needed to say in person? If she checked over the ropes herself it would make what I was doing easier, and it would still be trusting her.

Unfortunately, no amount of wishing would conjure up my daughter. I take out the support she did give me, the most recent letter she wrote, and read it again, focusing once more on that last line. 'Just think of me dad, and take a leap of faith'.

I regret that I don't have a picture of her to draw a mental image from, or even a picture of her mom to try and guess what she looks like. Then again, she's in the future. She doesn't really have any shape or form yet. I could probably just think of a generic sonogram or family photo. Those would probably be as accurate.

I push that unhelpful thought out of my mind. Think of her, think of the good. Think of her support, think of her words. I already hear a voice in my head when I read her words. I don't know if there's any way it could possibly be hers, but I think of it anyway. I look at the letter in my hand and think of her words. I can hear her voice clearly say 'think of me dad, and take a leap of faith'.

I focus on those words as I tie myself in. I make it a mantra. I force all thought from my head except those ten words. 'Think of me dad, and take a leap of faith'. I walk to the edge of the cliff, now mouthing the words to myself. 'Think of me dad, and take a leap of faith'. I grip the rope firmly in my hand, and jump.

I fall for about a quarter of a second, and then I grab the rope hard, stopping myself after only a few feet of free fall. A few feet is enough though. 'Think of me dad and take a leap of faith', I say without

thinking about it. I say it again to comfort myself. I did it! Here I am, sixty feet off the ground, and only a firm grip is keeping me from giving the ground a bear hug at nearly highway speeds.

I no longer feel an ounce of guilt for opening that letter early. "I love you sarah!" I shout, hoping somewhere nearby she hears me. A few jovial moments later I reach the bottom and look up to the top of the cliff. I punch the sky in elation. Best father daughter bonding experience ever.

I start doing a ridiculous rhythm-less dance at the bottom of the cliff when I think back on the first letter with today's date on it.

Hang on a minute, she said the reason she didn't want me to do this was because it required strength. The gear wasn't pleasant to haul out all this way, but it certainly wasn't anything I couldn't have managed a week ago. Even the rappelling had been fine. I should've been able to pull this off a month ago no problem. The only question I had was, how was I going to get back up? She hadn't explained how to do that and I certainly couldn't fathom how it was done.

"Are you going to climb that route friend?" A male voice behind me asks. I turn around and see another mountain climber with the same gear I had standing behind me. "My crew is going to be here in an hour but I'd love to climb with you if you're up for it." Sarah thought of everything.

The next week passes quickly and well. I'm beginning to revel in this life my daughter has set up for me. I have a couple hobbies, a healthy body, and I'm starting to make friends to do outdoors trips with. It's a good time, and while I miss my daughter, I feel good about our odd relationship, and when I take out her next letter it is with a sense of hope.

06/05/2014

"Hey dad, thank you for this last week. It's been good. You've done a lot of difficult things, and will still do a lot of difficult things, so I wanted to take the opportunity to say thank you for a good week." It was like she had experienced it with me. *"This next request is going to be a little interesting. You've got some great hobbies, and a healthy lifestyle, now I need to teach you the basic skill of courtship, ballroom dancing."* Alright! I had always wanted to learn ballroom dancing for years. This would be an easy one. As much as I appreciated how much she pushed me, a nice easy slow pitch that I could knock out of the park would not go amiss right now.

"There's a catch." Of course there was. *"You're going to have to teach your younger sister how to dance."* Grace? That wouldn't be so bad. Grace was a good girl. *"I know you haven't figure out why this is difficult, so I'll just let that sink in a second. Go on, put the letter down, think it through dad."* She's got me trained well, I put the letter down without hesitating or questioning it.

Grace is a nice girl. She's doing alright in school, got some friends. She is always friendly when I come over. She's still in high schools so we haven't talked in a while. Didn't she graduate recently?.....Oh, right.

“Yup, that’s right dad. You’re neglecting your family. I’m your family too dad, are you going to neglect me?” Of course not. How could she possibly think I would neglect her? I would and have jumped off a cliff for this girl. *“I know you’re dedicated to me dad, but you need to start showing the dedication to your family with the family members you have right now. I’m not always going to be the mature inter-time mastermind of personal growth that I am today. You made me who I am dad, and you need to start making your siblings the best that they can be. So here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go take lessons from a local dance instructor. The number is written on the bottom of this letter. Normally I’d let you figure it out for yourself, but I want you to go to one particular dance instructor. These things require a special touch, and I want you to learn from someone that I’ve personally vetted.”* Personally vetted huh? Good to know I was going to be in expert ‘daughter approved’ hands. *“One more thing, there are a few words for you on the back of this letter. Don’t look at them until the time is right.”*

When eventually she’s all grown up and writing time letters through the ancient annals of history, we are going to have a talk about not speaking mysteriously and saying what you mean. I dutifully fold the letter and stick it in my back pocket after I dial in the number to my phone. Let’s see who this dance instructor was that so impressed my daughter.

“Hello this is Sarah at dance works, how can I help you?”

Chapter 3

No, there was no way. She wouldn’t do something like this. This spoiled the mystery. This took all the fun out of the cat and mouse game we were playing. Would she? This was really playful and sneaky, which was like her.

“Hello?” The voice on the end said. “Is anybody there?”

“Uh, yes, I’m calling about a dance lesson.” I said.

“Right, I’ve been expecting you. You are looking into ballroom right?” She’s been expecting me!

“Sure, ballroom sounds good.” I said. She’s been expecting me huh? I’ll play along. “So how long have you been expecting me?” I asked.

“About an hour.” She responded. Only an hour? That couldn’t be right. I’d been reading the letters for about three months now.

“An hour?” I ask, hoping that I had misheard. I knew my hearing was just fine, but I wanted something to pick up my sinking spirits.

“Yeah, an hour.” She responded. “Your friend called about an hour ago to reserve you a spot in our upcoming class this Saturday. It’s a good thing too, because that class is filling up quickly.” My hopes shot back up.

“This friend, did she give a name? First and last please.” Wait, asking for first and last names was kind of creepy, even if this person was a friend. “Uh, I have trouble keeping my friends straight.” I added. It was true enough. I had a hard time keeping up with old friends.

“She didn’t give a first or last name.” Great, now I was just going to have to wonder if it was my Sarah or not. “She just said if you asked for her name to call her ‘little stinker’. So you could say ‘little’ is her first and ‘stinker’ is her last.”

It was her! Sarah could travel back here, that meant she was probably out there right now, or she could be here right now watching me. Our game of hide and seek suddenly had new energy. She was here. She was actually here.

“Hello? Are you there? Sir, if there’s a better time for you to make this call we are open for a few more hours.” The patience of the lady who owned the dance studio was wearing thin.

“I’m sorry, no that is just fine. She plays these little games with me.”

“That’s adorable sir.” Said the studio owner in a voice that indicated she didn’t think anything about this conversation was adorable.

“She’s my little stinker.” She’s going to wonder where her nickname comes from when she’s a kid. It’ll be a great story to tell her. “Hey, did she sign up for the class? Or reserve an extra seat?”

“No sir, it’ll just be you. You’ve just taken the last spot, and I happen to know the rest of the people taking the class. None of them answers to ‘little stinker’.” I guess it wouldn’t have been her style to show up herself. If she was going to she probably would have either said so in the letter, or given me no warning at all. Oh well, at least I know she’s here.

“Sir, are you signing up for the class or not?” The voice was now bordering on the impolite.

“Yes, yes, of course. When is it?” A few minutes later she had some credit card information, and I had information on when and where the class will be held.

During my nightly campfire I think about Sarah’s bait and switch with the dance studio. I wondered what I would do when we first met. If it was when she was a baby, when her mother gave her life, then I would probably do the ‘oh my gosh this is my kid’ stuff that other parents went through, but if we ran into each other now, when she was an adult, what would I do?

Could I ground her? She was putting me threw a loop, and I was still the parent, even if she had the upper hand, so I should be able to ground her. Did adult children ever get grounded? I guess once they moved out of the house you no longer had that power over them.

I take a pack of hot dogs and skewer a few, then prop up the skewers next to the fire. It took a while, but I think I had finally figured out the right distance from the fire and time to cook for hot dogs. I brought some buns, and munched on some baby carrots while I mused over my daughter. I couldn’t wait until I could read the next letter. When I was reading a letter from her, it was almost like talking to her.

I think when we meet I might do some sort of over the top ‘I can’t believe how much you’ve been yanking my chain’ shtick, but I’d probably calm down and want to talk about time travel instead. I hoped she managed it through some kind of future technology, and not through some sort of biological

ability she had. I wanted to be able to come back with her. We could go see the coliseum in Rome, or the pyramids at Giza when they were actually being built.

We would have so much time to do things together, and I could be the one showing her how things work. Who knows, maybe I had taught her what she was now teaching me.

I take the hot dogs off the fire, put one in a bun, and take a bite. They are just right, and I'm saddened when I've eaten them all and my meal is at an end.

That reminds me of the letters. I'm halfway through, and the last two are going to be months or years apart. Will we just stop our cross temporal conversation when the letters end? What was going to happen during the long spaces in between the last two? I'm no longer as eager as I was to open the next letter, because it would mean our time together was drawing to a close.

I kick some dirt onto the fire to douse it, and slip into my tent. Unpleasant thoughts like that can wait until tomorrow.

Friday passed well for me, most days did. My relationship with my daughter was pleasant, sleeping outside made it a lot easier to go to bed at a reasonable hour, and my diet had become very manageable now that I had reached my target weight. My coworkers took notice of my much more friendly nature and good health. When it got out that I was going to start learning how to dance, some of my female coworkers even went so far as to mention that they had a few unattached female friends who simply loved dancing. I remembered my daughter's plead about other women, and politely pretended not to understand what they were implying.

When I got home I ate and slept well, as usual, and set off for the dance lesson in good spirits when I woke up.

On the drive to the studio I thought about all the dance scenes I had witnessed in movies. Not the club scenes where there was no discernable reason or rhyme to the movements of the dancers, but the ordered dance scenes that were found in older movies. Great swathes of people executing choreographed and thought out moves.

I understood ballroom wasn't some spontaneous display of random movements, but it was more like a team sport where there practiced moves and plays that were executed in tandem. It was sort of a team sport where your partner was both a team mate and an opponent.

I arrived at the studio to find my grand thoughts of ballrooms dashed. In my head, the dancers had all been young men and women about my own age, all clad in gowns and suits. This was a foolish thought firstly because I was wearing a t shirt and jeans myself, and secondly because if I had thought about the matter more I would have realized everyone I knew who actually had some knowledge about dancing was much older than me. So I was rather shocked that the dance studio was filled with primarily older women. Any one of which could have been my mom's mom, and all of which were as plainly dressed as me.

So this was my Sarah approved of this place, there was no way I could possibly get any of these ladies on a date. Once again amazed that my daughter had played a prank on me, and I had fallen for it, I signed in and joined the others.

The lesson started off with introductions from Sarah the instructor, who noted with some displeasure that I was present. It was awkward being at least twenty years younger than everyone else. Were all dance studios like this? How did young people learn to dance if they had no one there own age to dance with? No wonder my female coworkers had been so eager about me learning to dance. I must be the only person under fifty they had heard of who had knew how to do it.

The instructor split us off into two groups, male and female, and began teaching us a basic step. It was a simple step. You put one foot behind the other, lifted the front foot up, put it back down, and then stepped in place with first your right foot, then your left foot. Back, front, left right, it was an easy sequence, but it took about half an hour to do it to a beat. You had to listen to the music and feel for the rhythm of the song. It wasn't a hard task, and it showed how much of a beginner I was that it took me a half hour to do it. One of the few older gentlemen who had been showing up told me not to worry about it, all young people had a lot of trouble finding the right beat in music.

I became somewhat envious of these older gentlemen as the teacher began to move the groups together and partner people up. There was an excess of women, so some of them had to wait their turn for a male partner. At this point the lesson became much more bearable. I wasn't stepping on my feet anymore, and the older ladies were very appreciative of me.

"Oh don't worry about it dear, just lift your hand a little higher, that's it. See how easy that was?" One lady told me as we were learning how to spin our partners. She was by no means the exception either, the nice little old ladies were very enthusiastic about showing me lots of tips and tricks. Whenever I had got the hang of a move, and was waiting on the instructor to show us the next one, the ladies were kind enough to show me new moves of their own, or to practice some moves from earlier in the lesson. It was a wonder these women needed any lessons at all, they seemed to have already mastered everything the instructor showed us.

The whole session was about two hours long, and by the end of it, thanks to the wonderful ladies who took the time to educate a complete beginner, I could fumble my way through about thirty seconds of music without repeating a move. I also left with a new appreciation for the older generation. They knew some very useful stuff. The next time I was around an older relative I'd have to pick their mind and see what other knowledge I could benefit from.

It isn't until I get home that I remember there's something written on the back of the letter. After making myself a few BLT sandwiches and grabbing an apple I pull it out and flip it over to read what's on the back.

"Are you always going to forget about your family like this?" I slap my forehead. Of course, I had forgotten about Grace. I had been so focused on learning to dance that she had completely slipped my mind.

I whip out my phone and dial her number.

“Hello?” She says. “Big brother is that you?” She calls me big brother like she’s missed hearing from me. It stings a little that she’s automatically fond of me.

“Hey Grace, how’s it going?” I ask, opting for a standard conversational question.

“Pretty good, what’s up?” She sounded perky.

“Not much, I just got back from a dance lesson and was wondering if you wanted to learn some basics with me.” Her response is rapid and strong.

“Absolutely! I love dancing, what kind are you learning?” She asks. I can imagine her crossing her fingers and hoping its ballroom.

“Ballroom, it’s pretty interesting, are you home today?” She doesn’t quite manage to hide the squeak in her voice. She sounds a lot like how I imagine my daughter sounds like.

“Yeah, are you coming over?” My family lives less than an hour’s drive from me. It won’t take long at all to hop in my car and drive to her.

“Sure am, I gotta take care of some things then I’ll be right over.”

“Awesome! Cya in a few big brother!” She hangs up the phone and I bolt down my meal before hopping in the shower. I had worked up a sweat learning to dance and was in need of a good rinsing down.

I have some time to think on the highways between our two houses. I use it to review everything I know about my younger sister. There isn’t much.

I think she’s interested in something artsy, maybe singing? I’m pretty sure she’s gotten into an out of state college, and I had a vague recollection of her having a boyfriend. I rack my brain for favorite movies, books, or TV shows, and come up with nothing.

When I pull into my parent’s driveway I’m nervous. This girl was just about a stranger to me, and she held me in high regard. I felt like I was on a tall tower and that if I said the wrong word it could crush her. I resolve not to express any negative opinions until I know what she likes so that I avoid stepping on her feelings.

I ring the doorbell and then wring my hands. She answers it so fast that I know she must’ve been waiting next to the door.

“Hey big brother!” She exclaims, wrapping me in a forceful hug.

“Oh, hey sis.” I say, awkwardly hugging back. “You uh, ready to dance?” I ask.

“Totally! The parents moved a bunch of furniture out of the way in the living room so we can practice. Our two younger brothers won’t be back from softball practice for a few hours so we’ve got time. Come on in!” she leads me inside and downstairs to the living room. My parents are in the kitchen, I wave to them as we pass by. Not sure if I should stop and talk to them. They wave back, and then I’m past the kitchen and we’re in the living room.

“So, how does this work?” She asks. “I got a nice long skirt that’ll swish when you spin me.” She spins on her heel and her skirt arches outward, flowing gracefully around her. I make a mental note to ask about her boyfriend and make sure to threaten his life the next time I see him.

“Looks pretty sis. How’s um, Bryan?” I ask, trying to remember the kid’s name.

“Blake.” She responds, stopping her spin and looking somewhat deflated. “We broke up four months ago.”

“Oh.” I say. “Want to learn the basic step?” I ask.

“Sure!” She says, brightening back up. “How does it work?” I open a playlist on my phone of appropriate music to dance to, and we start off with the basic step.

She learns much more quickly than I had. In only about ten minutes she’s got it down, and can rapidly pick up the beat to any song I put on.

“That’s good sis, now let’s do some of those spins you were talking about.” She claps her hands, and I’m embarrassed with how easily she takes to spinning. It’s like she had come preprogrammed with dance knowledge. We work through every move I learned in half the time it took me to pick it up. This must be why there were so many more women than men at the dance class. Dancing seemed to come more naturally to women.

“I hate to say this sis, but that’s all I know.” I’m forced to say after about an hour. She pouts and says.

“Really, can we learn some more? There’s got to be stuff like this on youtube.” She has a point, and I do need to learn more moves. I can only go for about thirty seconds, and most songs I know last 3 or 4 minutes. I’d like to know at least one song’s worth of moves, if not several.

“That’s a good idea. I say.” Before I can even consent she pulls up a video on her phone.

“You were planning on learning new moves before I even showed up weren’t you?” I asked Grace. She blushed and nodded.

“I really want to learn this one.” She shows me the video on her phone, and that starts several hours of us learning new moves together. She takes to it like a fish to water, and by the time we finish she’s learning her part, and then teaching me my part. We master enough moves to go through one full song, and can do small changes to the moves to get through a second.

Our improvised dancing lesson turns into a ‘have you seen this ridiculous internet video’ contest. Our parents come in at some point and feed us dinner. The sun begins to set just as we start watching a spoof trailer for a movie that came out yesterday. I should get going. It’s going to be past dark by the time I get home as it is.

“Hey, I actually really want to see this. I think there’s a show in about an hour. Want to go check it out?” Grace asks. That’s an hour until the movie starts, two hours for the movie, and then an hour to get home and get settled. That’s four hours past dark, and it’s been a non-stop day.

“I don’t know Grace. It’ll be real late by the time I get home and I’m really tired.” Grace stops the video.

"Yeah, okay, I get it." She says.

"We'll go some other time." I tell her. She nods again, but doesn't open her mouth.

"When will I see you again?" She asks. I want to tell her tomorrow, but I'm going to need a day to relax before work, and then there was the next letter. There was no telling what Sarah was going to ask me to do in it. I couldn't make plans before then.

"I don't know." She nodded again.

"Yeah sure, okay." She says. Now we're just sitting around looking at a phone. It's definitely time to leave.

"So, I'm going to head out. See you around?" She shrugs.

"I'm not so sure. I leave for college at the end of the summer." That's only two months away, and there were a lot of letters between now and then.

"Well, bye." I say. Grace doesn't respond.

I hadn't done anything wrong. I tell myself when I get home. My daughter needed me to be ready for whatever she could throw at me. I needed to focus on her first, and then I could make some time for family. It wasn't like Grace was going to drop off the face of the planet when she went to college. She would still have an internet connection and a phone. We would still keep up.

'Like you've been keeping up the last six months?' A little voice in my head points out. I can't think of a response to that. Unlike Friday, Sunday is very long, and I replay the talk with my younger sister in my head many times.

When I walk up the stairs Monday to get Sarah's next letter, I brace myself.

06/09/2014

"Later, you'll make this right. Now's not the time to beat yourself up about it." I breathe a sigh of relief. I still feel guilty, but I'm relieved Sarah isn't holding it against me. *"Now it's time to put your skills to the test. You've been learning dancing, now you get to see if you can impress a girl you're not related to with them. There's a dance hall listed below that has girls your own age, go there, and put your training into action. I want you to stay there the whole night and make sure you have this skill nailed down."* It's one of the shortest letters she writes me that still provides useful instruction.

I check their website and note that their next dance is the 11th. I stare at the screen, something is off about this one. I already know how to dance. I spent all of Saturday dancing with my younger sister to be sure. It's too easy. I wanted it to be harder, not only because I didn't think Sarah would give me something to do that was easy, but because I wanted to make up for messing things up with Grace. I felt

if I did something difficult that I would restore myself in my daughter's eyes, and soothe my aching conscious at the same time.

There was something fishy going on here.

The night of the dance comes, and I head down to the hall in semi-formal clothes. The entrance fee is minimal, and I walk into the hall to take a look around. It's the size of a basketball court, and it's filled with young couples swirling around. Someone took my mental vision of what dancing should be and brought it to life.

I take a closer look at the couples dancing and see that just as the letter says these dancers are my own age, and not only that, they seem to be the crème of the crop in terms of appearance.

So that's the catch. That's why she told me to stay the whole night. This wasn't about dancing. This was about loyalty. She had given me an in shape healthy body, taught me a rare skill that is rather attractive, and dropped me in the middle of a giant group of girls who wanted me to use this skill on them, but I'm not allowed to try and start something with any of them. My daughter has become my own personal devil.

I walk up to a gentlemen standing to one side and observing the dance.

"Excuse me." I say. "How long does this dance last? The website didn't say."

"Four hours." He tells me. "Don't worry; they make sure everybody dances pretty much the whole time. As soon as this song is done we'll get into the mix. You get your money's worth."

"Great, thanks." I say. Four hours, and I would be dancing with pretty girls the whole time. Fantastic.

It occurs to me my daughter could very easily be one of the girls dancing. She could use a fake name and I'd never know. Not that it should matter. She seemed to know everything anyway. Still, I would have to be extra careful to be a model gentlemen and not pursue any lady.

I think my brain somehow broadcasted this thought to the women present, and they took it as a challenge. The entire night women are impressed by my dancing skills and try to lay claim to me for repeated dances. I politely decline, not wanting to spend too much time with any one girl lest I become attached, and so I bounce around to different partners, all of whom are amazed at my dancing prowess. Evidently I'm one of the few men present that it took it upon themselves to actually learn how to dance before going to a dance hall. One girl in particular with long brown hair is extremely nice to me.

I considered dancing badly to avoid unwanted attention, but I just know Sarah is going to hold that against me somehow, so I grit my teeth and dip, spin, toss, and twirl girls for all four hours until the last song is over. I hastily make my way to the exit, staring at the floor as I go to avoid any possible eye contact.

Five numbers. Even with all the rush and hurry of dancing, five separate girls give me their numbers. I walk up to the attic and lay them down in front of the chest like some kind of sacrificial offering.

I had wanted some sort of difficult task to prove to myself and to Sarah that I was still dad material. I had got my money's worth. There were five pretty girls out there waiting for me to call them, and instead of spending the evening chatting with one or more of them, I curled up into my sleeping bag, and tried to convince myself that I had merely imagined them giving me their numbers.

The next day I take out my pent up frustration on my job, and once again have a most productive day. I storm into the attic after work, brush aside the numbers, and open the chest. I extract the letter and am amazed at its length. It's certainly the longest letter to date by a large margin.

06/12/2014

"Thank you daddy. I know how hard it was waiting for that one girl to call you, and now you had to restrain yourself from calling five. Thank you. I want you to know I wasn't being mean. This had a purpose." I had thought the purpose was to be mean. *"You see, you're about halfway to being ready for mom. You now have a healthy body, and a healthy social with fun hobbies. You have two more things to fix before meeting mom, and the first of those two things, is how to get a girl."* As I had done so many times before, I put the letter down. I was going to learn how to talk to girls, from my daughter, a girl whom I was supposed to eventually teach about boys. I couldn't decide if I should feel emasculated or embarrassed. I decided to feel both.

"Oh stop it. It won't be that bad. I know what I'm doing." That was hardly the problem. *"So you see you had to learn to restrain yourself when it came to girls. You're about to learn how to get a number. You needed to learn some restraint so you wouldn't call them, and yesterday was a perfect time. You felt the need to prove yourself, so now you have, and now that we both know you won't call a girl, I will teach you how to get a number."* This was not a skill I ever thought I would put effort into learning.

I always thought that when you met the right person things just worked. Like in books or movies, if you really were compatible with each other then you shouldn't need a bunch of tricks. *"Because you know books and movies do such a good job of representing how things work in real life. That's why we go to movies, to see how things work in real life."* She had a point, but still, I wasn't going to be one of those guys who took advantage of girls, and I would've thought a girl would understand that. Love should be enough.

"So love means never making an effort?" That's not what I had thought, and did she have a mind reading device? Even if she could travel back in time, how could she possibly know what went on inside my head this well? *"You're an engineer. You believe in hard solid facts. Believe this, just going with the flow and letting your personalities mesh ends with you divorcing mom. Clearly, your way of doing things is wrong. Now, I'm not saying this is the only way, and that other people need to learn how to do this. I am saying if you don't learn this, you might as well burn the rest of the letters because it won't fix things."* Trust, so much trust, I should be a master at that fall backwards into somebody's arm drill they did at team building events.

"I know I ask a lot of you dad, and I know this is going to get weird, and I want you to know it's because I know you can take it. I know you are a strong man who can handle this, and I wouldn't ask it of you if I knew you couldn't do it. You can do this dad." She always knows just the right words to say to me.

"Now, I'm going to get started. I'll talk about this more in future letters. This is going to take a while to master, and I'll feed you knowledge as you need it. I want you to just focus on what I'm going to say here. There's a lot to this and I don't want you to get overwhelmed." She doesn't want me to get overwhelmed. It's a little late for that. I was very far down the rabbit hole at this point.

"So, let's start from the beginning. You walk into somewhere, let's say a coffee shop. You see a girl sitting down at a table and you want to get her on a date, that's the goal. You've never seen her before in your life. You didn't know you were going to run into a girl here, what's the first thing you say? I want you to think about it first before I give you the answer." It was a silly question. Normal people said hi when they wanted to start a conversation. *"Okay, you've said hi. She says hi back. She is wondering who this random person is whose talking to her and you have not made any positive impression on her. Now what?"* That was a pretty rough assessment. Well, I guess I'd ask her what she's drinking. *"She tells you it's hot chocolate and wonders why you're asking about her drink. She is now wondering when you're going to leave and the battle is lost. Dad, if that kind of thing worked, everyone would have game."* Just once, I wanted her to be wrong, like dead wrong about something.

"I'm not being mean to you dad. I'm just showing you that there's a better way to do this. Girls have really high expectations. She wants you to be funny, smart, confident, create a conversation that has a charge and romantic bent while still maintaining a comfortable conversational atmosphere that makes her feel safe around you. Also she thinks this should all just 'come naturally' so if she thinks you're doing something you've been taught she's going to bolt." That didn't seem fair. All those girls last night had handed out numbers without too much trouble. I shouldn't have difficulty doing that again.

"Dad, the ugliest, creepiest, and foulest smelling man in the world can get girls at his own rock concert. You can get a girl at a dance, great. What are you going to do once you're off the dance floor? Look dad, you can debate this more with yourself later. Right now, you need to read what I'm telling you, and trust me that you need to know this stuff for mom. Sure you two will get together without this, but you need to put magic into the relationship, and knowing this stuff is the key to learning that magic. It's a bridge into a beautiful place. You may not like the way the bridge looks, but it's going to take you where you want to go." I resigned myself. She had me beat. I would think on this later and see if I could find some hole in her logic, but for now, she had won.

"Good, now we're going to talk about what you're going to say to her, and how you're going to build up to a kiss, because the road to the first kiss starts when you say hi." I was barely halfway through the letter. This was going to be a long read.

I don't know how my daughter knew all this, but her insight into this matter was extensive. She explained that there are several ways to start a conversation with a girl. There are practiced lines that you can use anywhere like 'Hey, did you study interior design? That's funny because as soon as I saw you the whole room became beautiful.' These were not very effective, but they required the smallest amount of effort, and therefore the smallest amount of courage. She recommended using these only as an exercise for getting over any fear of talking to girls that I still had.

After practiced lines there were compliments. You had to pay the compliment in a certain way. Girls put a lot of effort into their appearance, my daughter told me, so compliment on something she's worked on were best. Jewelry was ideal. Positive feedback about her dress or skirt was good. Hair styling was okay, and you could resort to stuff like fingernails if you had to. I thought it was creepy to start calling a girl pretty from the get go, but my daughter informed me that this did in fact work. They weren't the best option, but they were a good back up.

Then there was the more effective method that she recommended, commenting on the situation. If you are in the same environment as someone it makes sense for you to comment on that environment. If you're in a sandwich shop it's perfectly natural to ask what someone's favorite sandwich is. It's the hardest to do because you have to make it specific to the situation. The more specific the better it would work. Instead of asking about her favorite sandwich, it would be better to point out that all of the in house specialty sandwiches would probably give a farm animal PTSD from all the meat and cheese on them. The less generic, the more she'll like it.

That portion of the letter I understand. The next portion is far more....unorthodox. It starts with a question. *"How do you go from never having touched someone before in your life, to kissing them?"* It was a difficult question. I thought the answer was a mixture of blink luck and large amounts of courage. My daughter informed me this was not the case, and then proceeded to outline a very detailed method for progressing from no contact to kiss.

She said it was all about getting her more and more comfortable with you touching her. You started with the upper arm. The upper arm was surprisingly the least personal part of the human body. You would tap her on the upper arm, and point something out. You could do this a few more times, letting your touch linger a bit more each time. Then you went to the shoulders and the hands. Surprisingly she recommended playing a thumb war as a good way to get her comfortable with you holding her hands.

After she discusses the hands she ends the lesson. *"So, that's the easy part. You now know what you're going to say, and how you're going to start getting comfortable with physical contact. Next letter we'll discuss a bit more about having a conversation, for now, here's your mission."* I braced myself. *"You're going to practice using this stuff until the next letter, but first, there's the problem of your shyness. On the back of this letter I've written ten of the cheesiest pick-up lines I know of. You have to use all of them on girls before you can progress. One last thing before you flip it though. Remember, none of these girls will be my mom, but they will be somebody's mom. Treat them with respect, and leave them with a smile on their face. You are here to learn, don't do it at other people's expense."* I flip the letter over.

"Hey, can I take your picture so I can prove to all my friends that angels exist? This one doesn't count unless you get the photo."

"Are you religious? Because you're the answer to all my prayers."

"Introduce yourself and ask her what her name is, after she tells you say it followed by your last name."

"Hey do you have a band aid? Because I just scraped my knee falling for you."

"Come on give it back, give it back(what?) my heart."

"You already know the interior decorator line."

"Do you know what my shirt is made of? Boyfriend material."

"Hey, didn't we take a class together? That's weird, because I could've sworn we had chemistry."

"You're so beautiful that you made me forget my pick up line."

"Now for the kicker dad, if you can ask this then you will have truly conquered any fear of talking to girls. After you use all nine other lines, look for a girl with her phone on it. Walk up to her and ask for it to call someone. When she gives it to you, call her mom, and tell her that you've just met her daughter and want her to know that she's one of the most beautiful girls you've ever seen. You have one week dad."

Chapter 4

Should I be worried about my daughter? Was this normal behavior for someone in the future? I was concerned how she knew all of this. Was my daughter a player? I mean, it had to work if she told me it would. This time travel thing made her borderline omniscient, but still, we were going to have a long talk about boys when she grows up.

Focus, think about your daughter's dating life later, focus on getting her born now. Ten lines in seven days, and they were some doozies. I was going to make such an idiot out of myself. Who said this kind of stuff?

This could be one of her tricks. I heard guys got slapped for saying pick-up lines to girls. Maybe my daughter thought it would be funny to get me slapped a bunch.

I had better buckle down to this, first I would pick a line, then I would need to find a girl to drop it on. So, which line was the easiest? It was kind of creepy to ask for a picture, so the first one is out. Religion is a hot topic, so the second one is gone. Marriage was really fast paced, so the third one wasn't an option. The fourth one had promise. I knew girls sometimes kept band aids in their purses, and asking strangers for medical help was kind of socially acceptable. It was cute. I could do it.

Next thing was to find a place. Where did girls go? Had I seen any recently? There was the dance hall, but I wanted to go back there sometime, so I didn't want to make a fool of myself there. I saw girls jogging around sometimes, but that could take a while to run into one. Sometimes I could jog for miles without seeing a single female. There were always bars and clubs, but I didn't frequent such places.

Maybe this was why I needed more help with girls, there weren't any places I ran into them a lot in my normal life. If I was a girl, where would I go? Hair salon? Nah, I didn't need a haircut, and I would be strapped down to a chair. If I was going to do this I wanted a quick means of escape.

What about somewhere where they sold makeup? No good, I didn't know if stores that specifically sold makeup existed, much less where they were. I needed some place more normal.

Girls had to eat too, what about a restaurant? Oh, a coffee shop would be perfect! There were probably plenty of girls, and I could leave whenever I wanted. It was perfect. I now had a mission, and there was plenty of daylight left to make it happen.

A short while later I found myself in a coffee shop waiting in line between two girls who, as luck would have it, were both close to me in age. Good, this would be easy. The girl in front of me had three

people in front of her, I would spend the next minute or two psyching myself out, and when she completed her order I would ask her for a band aid as she walked passed me. Good, this was good. I could do this.

Alright, two people left, here we go. Wait, isn't this weird? She's going to know I haven't scraped my knee. I've been standing behind her this whole time. She's going to see right through it. This wasn't going to work.

One person left. No, I was being stupid. It wasn't supposed to make sense. It was supposed to be cute. It was all for shock value anyway. I just had to get this out of the way so I could continue with my daughter's plan.

Oh shoot, now she's ordering, any second now I'm going to have to do it. She's getting a hot chocolate, can I work with that? Maybe something about girl's liking chocolate? No, no, stay on topic, don't make this too complicated.

Now's she's turning, this is it. What was my line again, something about bleeding? That wasn't it. She sees me looking at her! Look away quickly, act like you were looking at the menu. Good, I think I saved it. I forgot my line, but that was okay, there was still the girl behind me. I would order, turn, and drop the line. Make it quick and easy, don't overthink it.

"Sir what can I get you?" The cashier with long brown hair asks me with a professional smile. What do they serve here again? I managed to not read a single word when I had pretended to study the menu.

"I'll have what she's having." I say, gesturing to the last girl.

"Small hot chocolate?" She asks. I nod and hand her my card. Any second now I'm going to have to turn and address the girl behind me. I needed to focus on the line. 'Did I scrape my knee falling for you?'. That didn't make sense.

"Here's your hot chocolate sir." The lady said.

"Knees." I say back to her. Her professional smile slips for a second.

I can't say anything now, look at the ground and walk away. Just look at the ground and walk away. I walk outside with my drink, too red faced to possibly go back in. I must be one of the world's most socially inept people. I had whiffed not one, but two chances to drop the line, and had even botched what should be a routine interaction with someone who is paid to be sociable to me.

I kick a trash can on my way to my car. I stub my toe doing this, and spill hot chocolate on myself, which is still quite hot. I barely manage to stop myself from swearing as one of the girls from the shop comes up to me. She had been walking to her car, and had heard me kick the trash can.

"Are you okay? That sounds like it hurt." She looks at my leg.

"I think it's okay, but do you have a band aid? I think I scraped my knee falling for you." She looks like she's just seen an oncoming train, and I feel like a jerk. Then she laughs and gets a very genuine smile.

“Thank you.” She says, and starts walking away. It worked! Holy cow it worked! I didn’t get slapped, and she had even laughed! I kind of wanted to go back and pick up the conversation. Maybe I could take that somewhere. No, first rule of this thing was don’t get numbers. The goal was to get better with girls so I could treat my wife well. I wasn’t actually supposed to succeed.

Wow it was such a rush to make a girl smile like that. It was like that feeling of starting a fire, mixed with the excitement of jumping off the cliff. I felt exhilarated and validated as a man. I could make girls smile and laugh.

As I drive my car home I wonder why she said thank you. I had made a request of her, people usually either gave you what you wanted or denied your request by saying sorry when you asked for something. You didn’t thank someone who tried to get something from you. It was the person who received the gift that did the thanking. I should be thanking her for giving me a smile and a laugh.

It didn’t make sense to me, maybe she was a bit abnormal for a girl, or maybe these pick-up lines didn’t work the way I thought they did. I was going to call it quits for the night. I would think about other places I could go tomorrow. Maybe the other nine would all slap me and this was a one off fluke. I would bask in my victory tonight. I’d select the next line I would use, and then start my nightly fire. Today was a good day.

After work the following day, I head to a grocery store. I need to go to the store anyway, and I’ve seen girls in this store before.

I decided last night to use the heart line. I figured I could find a girl who was holding something in her hand, and ask for it back. It wouldn’t be completely weird that way, just mostly weird.

It’s not long before I spot my quarry. She’s on the isle with all the sandwich stuff, holding two different brands of peanut butter. Brimming with confidence I stride over to her.

“Come on, give it back.” I say. She looks up, clearly confused. She’s supposed to say what. She doesn’t say anything. Why isn’t she saying what? This is weird, I should leave. No, I have to finish the line.

“My heart.” I say. She puts the peanut butter in her cart and walks away, glancing over her shoulder at me.

I’m a jerk. There’s no other way about it. I’m a jerk. I hadn’t been slapped, but I kind of wished she had slapped me. I would have deserved it. She had probably been having a perfectly fine day before I had walked up to her, and now I had ruined it.

I still had to do this another eight times. I needed to do at least one more today. Did my daughter know it would mess with the girl’s day? She must’ve thought it worth the cost.

I had to do this eight more times. I buy some crackers and leave the store. Let’s just get this next one over with, and then we’ll call it a day. I already had the next line all figured out.

The interior decorator line was educationally related, so I could go to the local community college. I might maybe, in the right light, pass as college age, and college students asked each other what their major was all the time. It wasn't that much of a stretch to finish off the rest of the line.

I drive to the local community college, and begin walking around. It's not hard to find a girl, but it is hard to find the courage to say something. I start wandering aimlessly, and eventually begin to just walk in a loop around the campus.

Had I made a net positive on life with this bold new way of talking to girls? The first girl had certainly walked away feeling much better. I think I had made her day, but had the impact I made on the second girl cancelled that out? Was I neutral then? That meant this next girl would either put me in a hole or give me a buffer for the next rejection.

As always, thinking wasn't helping. There was nothing else for it. I've got to do it, and the more I walk around the harder it's going to get.

I pick the very next girl walking up to me, she catches me looking at her and I flinch, but maintain eye contact as I walk up to her. She's carrying some books on her way to class, and smiles as I get closer. I'm so focused I don't notice her books.

"Hey, do you study interior design?" I ask.

"Uh, nursing actually." She points to the large stack of nursing books she's carrying. Of course she's carrying books that invalidate my pick up line.

"That's funny, because as soon as I saw you the whole room became beautiful." She gets the same deer in the headlights look the first girl gets, and then tilts her head back laughing.

"We're outside silly." She says. This line was about as airtight as a cheese grater.

"Well I guess that means you're really good." I say. She laughs again and puts her books down. She extends a hand.

"I'm Hannah." I take her hand and shake it.

"I'm, uh...." Should I use my real name? Better not. I'll go with my middle name.

"I'm Jack." I say. She's actually going to stick around and have a bit of a conversation? That didn't happen with the other girls.

"Well, uh Jack, what do you study?" She asks. Oh man, what was I supposed to say? The letters hadn't gone this far. I had used the pick-up line. I should just walk away, but that would be rude.

"I'm actually trying out pick-up lines and figured that a college would be a good place to ask about what people are studying." I say. Instantly I regret it as she just blinks at me and glances down at her books, no doubt having second thoughts about talking to me.

"That's, blunt." She says. "Nobody says that."

"Well, I'm not a very normal person." I say.

“Yeah, I can see that.” She says, getting a bit of her smile back. “Hey Jack, I’ve got to get to class, I’ll see you later.” We say goodbye and she heads off.

I watch her head off, and scratch my head. The letters had given me the impression that there was a method to this. There were different kinds of things you started a conversation with, and rules about how to initiate physical contact. It had started to sound like there was a formula, but I had used the same class of conversation starters with three very different results. This was not like doing an experiment to derive a formula, as I had begun to believe. This was going shopping blindfolded and being told to head left when you enter the store because the vegetables are somewhere over there.

I hoped the rest of the process wasn’t going to be like this. I liked consistency. In science you were supposed to use the same input to get the same output. It’s called repeatability and it was how you discovered facts. It seemed like there were no facts here. Every person was going to be different and the most you could hope for was general guiding principles. It was like sticking your hand into dark water. You could pull out a pearl, or you could pull out a piranha.

Thankful that I was one third of the way there, I went home. I spent the evening memorizing and ranking the other lines in order of difficulty. I was starting to get my legs under me, and had resolved the next day to use five lines. The fourth day I would use two, and then finish off with the really hard line. That would give me time to practice the physical bit the sixth day, and wrap up the other lessons on the seventh day, when I would open my daughter’s next letter.

How did people do this? I had one girl spontaneously give me her number. I accepted the number then threw it away to keep with the rules of my daughter. I had a second girl pretend not to hear me and keep walking. Two more girls did the deer in the headlights followed by a laugh, and a fifth looked at me strange and in a gentle but firm way told me she had a boyfriend.

It was like fighting a battle every time. You had to put this big investment of emotional energy into it, and you didn’t know if you’d get that emotional energy reciprocated or if you’d get it stomped on. I was glad I already had an introduction to my wife waiting for me in one of these letters, and wouldn’t have to mess around with this ridiculous nonsense.

It never truly got easier either. The fear and anxiety was still there, you just learned to cope with it and do what you came to do anyway. The last two I had saved were the angle line, and the boyfriend line. I had found two coffee shops next to each other, and was going to knock both of these out so I could go to my final location for the last pick up line.

I enter the first coffee shop, and spot a girl working on a laptop while sipping on a cup of something steaming. I’ve learned to instantly walk over to a girl as soon as you see her. It prevents you from overthinking things and freaking yourself out.

I try and catch her eye as I walk over, but she’s got her nose buried in what she’s working on.

“Hey.” I say as I walk over. She glances up briefly, but keeps working on her laptop.

“Do you know what this shirt is made of?” I ask. To her credit, she gives it a moment’s inspection before guessing.

“Cotton.” She says disinterestedly and returns to her computer.

“Boyfriend material.” I correct her. She snorts and says.

“Cute.” And doesn’t look up from her computer. It’s, not a horrible response, but not a very good one either. I walk out the back to avoid people staring, and make my way to the second shop. There’s just one last short line to dish out before the big one.

As with the first shop I enter the second one and as soon as I see a girl reading a book in a corner chair I approach her.

“Excuse me miss.” I say. She puts her finger in the book as she puts it down to look at me.

“Can I get a photo with you to prove to all my friends that angels exist?” I ask. She stares at me.

“I don’t let strangers take photos of me.” She says. Ouch, it’s the first time a girl puts the guilt on me. The girl in the grocery store had just walked away, but this girl had basically just called me a creeper.

“Cool.” Is all I can think to say before walking out the back. I had wanted to finish on a high note. I had this image of the girl calling one of her friends over to take the picture with me, and maybe get a number out of it. I didn’t use the numbers, but they made me feel a lot better.

Now I’m heading into the granddaddy of all pick-up lines with one tepid response, and one cold response, great.

The college campus is about the same as I left it, still plenty of girls walking about. Only I’m not just looking for any girl. I need a girl with a cell phone out. Which isn’t much of a restriction, but it is during the summer, so most people are running quickly to and from summer classes.

Eventually I see her. Like a hunter spotting a deer in the distance I instinctively freeze. I was lucky she was standing in one place, but not lucky that she was angrily talking on the phone with someone.

I could find someone else. I could turn around and go somewhere else. I could even come back another day. I still had plenty of time. I didn’t need to do the rest of the stuff in the letters. All she said was use the ten lines. That was it.

But that wasn’t the point of the lesson. It wasn’t about saying ridiculous things. It was about not letting fear determine your actions.

I walked forward, and didn’t even wait for her to finish her call.

“Hey, excuse me, can I borrow your phone.” She rounded on me like a lion about to pounce on her prey. Her eyes tried to bore holes through my skull, and she exasperatedly handed me the phone, with the other person still on the line.

“Hello, is this...” I put my hand over the receiver. I didn’t know the girl’s name. “What’s your name?” I asked the girl. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. She was totally about to take her phone back and slap me or something.

“Lindsey.” She practically spat out the name.

“Is this Lindsey’s mom?” I asked.

“It’s her father.” A rough male voice came through the earpiece.

“Great, listen, I just saw your daughter, and she was so beautiful I wanted your help in getting her on a date. Where do you think I should take her?” Everyone stopped. Lindsey’s dad didn’t say anything. Lindsey’s jaw had dropped, and all the students in a ten foot radius, who had been rushing to get to their exams, now stood still watching me.

“Hello?” I said. There was no sound, and I was still being watched. It was like I was performing a magic trick or something.

The line went dead. I looked at the phone to make sure that the call was indeed over, and then handed the device back to Lindsey.

“Nice bracelet you have on by the way.” I tell her as she takes her phone back, her mouth is still hanging open wide enough to fit two cheeseburgers, and no one has started moving yet.

I had bombed, and bombed bad. I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to go back to the campus for months without somebody pointing me out as that weird guy who called the girl’s parents.

I don’t care. I’ve won. I did something so immensely gutsy that most men wouldn’t even dream of doing it. This was one of those things that people joked about, but never did. Every guy I know wanted this, this total mastery of self. This ability to defy social pressure and take hit after hit, and still keep coming.

I walk back to my car with twenty plus pairs of eyes following me. They can’t believe what they’ve just seen. Some of them are horrified. Some of them are envious. Some of them are so shocked that they don’t know what to think. All of them know they’ve witnessed a profound act of courage.

I go back in the attic to complete a little ritual. After every trip out to drop pick-up lines I had returned home to check off a line from the list Sarah had wrote me. This was to make sure I didn’t repeat any that I didn’t have to, and to give myself a reward for sticking it out and having the guts to do it. I would now cross off the last line, and emerge victorious from another of my daughter’s challenges.

I open the box and pull out the letter, pen at the ready, and find there is new text. A few weeks earlier I might have dropped the letter like it was burning my hand, now I just read through it, curious at the new words. They are certainly new. I had read this letter many times, and there was never any additional text below the lines. It read:

"I'm proud of you dad. As bizarre a thing as it is to be proud of, I am. I remember how crushed you were when that one girl didn't call you. A single rejection ruined your day, and you've just walked away with your head held high from one of the most spectacular rejections I've ever see. You are an awesome man who is deserving of a wonderful person. There are still a few more letters, but know that I've written them to you with the knowledge that you are the kind of strong man who can do what needs to be done even when all societal pressure and emotional turmoil tell him to stop. You're the best, I love you, and I'm proud to call you my father."

Your adoring daughter,

Sarah

She came back again! This is proof that she has been traveling back and forth through time on more than one occasion. Not only is there additional text, but the original text, the list of 10 lines, has been moved to the top of the page where before it was in the middle. My daughter must have rewrote the letter, but put the lines at the top. The lines I drew across the paper are also gone. She had to leave the old one, and then sometime while I was gone, she traveled back again, and then replaced the original letter with this new one. She was coming back and forth multiple times for me. I win at life.

The rest of the two days are fun. I enjoy practicing all the various kinds of lines and touch games. I start with the compliment openers, finding the right compliment was a game in itself. I would see a girl and instantly size up what she wanted me to compliment her on. Hair is in a ponytail, standard low effort style, no good, generic plastic necklace, t-shirt with no brand name, bracelet just looks like her name. Oh wait, it's silver, bingo.

"Hey I love your necklace."

"Oh thank you, my mom got it for me on my last birthday."

T-shirt with band name, but I don't recognize the band. Hair all the way down, no bracelets, ear ring, or jewelry.

"Excuse me, I just had to say you look very perky today."

"Thanks, I've been getting a full nights rest."

"Clearly, it's showing in your face very well."

Some girls were harder than others, but if you had a minute to think about it, you could always find something.

These lines were okay, you often got a conversation started, but only if you immediately had something else to talk about. That was why the situation based opening lines worked best, you just jumped straight into the middle of a conversation about something.

It was during these conversations that I mastered the fun little touch games. It was easier than I had thought. First I usually picked something to point out. Just touch their shoulder and say 'hey do you see that?'. Didn't matter what, maybe someone was wearing a shirt you liked, or someone had a bumper sticker you identified with.

I would point out several things, and then I would progress to the hand games. They were ridiculous things. My favorite one started with me asking for a girl's hand. I thought it would be a strange request, but people will just give you their hands if you ask. I would then place one of my hands below theirs, and one above theirs. I would then gesture with my head for them to put their hand on top of mine, so we had a pile of alternating hands. I would then slip my bottom hand onto the top of the pile. Without fail, every single girl would then slip her bottom hand out and put it on top. You could then keep going, building up until she couldn't reach. You could move your hand from the top to the bottom. Or you could just pull both of your hands out at once.

My next favorite came from dancing. I was thinking dancing worked so well because it was something not a lot of guys did, but girls wanted to do. What if I did other things that girls liked to do?

I tested this theory by just walking into a coffee shop, and when the cashier asked what I wanted I responded by playing patty cake with her. She went along with it for two whole minutes before a gentleman at the back of the line cleared his throat loudly. The cashier giggled, and then wrote her number down on the receipt.

I enjoyed messing around with all of the various ways that I could employ to start conversations and play touch games. I would think of an idea. I would execute that idea, and some worked, while others bombed. When the sun went down I had a small arsenal of games and lines in my back pocket that I could pull out whenever I wanted to. If I ever ran out of things to say, I would resort to a touch game to buy some time, or drop a cheesy line to change the subject. In a few cases I decided to literally pick the girl up and swing her around a few times. That seemed to reset the conversation and put a grin on the girl's face.

I almost regretted climbing the stairs to read my daughter's next letter. I was enjoying myself.

05/26/14

"Well done father. I knew you could do it, and you have proven once again you are the kind of man that can be relied on. You're one of the good guys. I've got a light task for you this week. Just spend some time talking to girls. Not just any talking of course. You're going to be looking for information in these girls. Have you noticed that girls respond very differently to the same comment because all of them are their own unique person? You need to start figuring out what kind of person they are so you can find the right girl."

"To do that, you have to ask the right questions, see if she can carry a conversation, and pick your topics well. We're going to start with the last one."

"Picking your topics well, there are a few things you're going to want to know about a girl. One is her education. Education is the first step in a career, and you need to find out where she stands. This one is easy. Know that interior design line? Drop it in the middle. That line does ask what she studies. She will most likely tell you." I remember, the girl I dropped it on had said she was a nursing student. "From there you can talk about what her career plans are fairly easily. There are other more direct ways of asking things, but be she sure you make a mental list ahead of time so you hit your subjects. Don't get stuck discussing favorite movies. If you want movie reviews they have websites for that. You're here to find facts."

"As regards the first one, here's a fun question 'you get three wishes, but can't wish for anything that can be bought or sold, and the wish has to be selfish. Sounds like an intriguing thought experiment right? It can be rephrased 'describe to me the three things you value most'. For the rest of the questions you want to stick with the interrogative 'why'. What she does, how she does it, where she does it, and who she does it with, are not nearly as valuable as knowing why she does it. All four of the other things can change, but the core of who she is can be defined with 'why'. Find the why, and you find what truly makes her who she is." I strongly suspect that my daughter writes philosophy.

"As for the second one, I've got one instruction for you. Close your mouth and let her talk. Girls like a guy who can carry and lead a conversation well, but you need to know this girl can hold her own. You don't want to do all the talking in the relationship do you? Let her talk, see what she talks about. In the same way that the compliment that means the most is the one that is unsolicited, the conversation topic she picks on her own is the one that tells you the most about her. See where her mind goes when left to its own devices. Keep a firm hand on the conversation, but also pay attention to where she steers it when you let her have the wheel."

"Got it dad, ask meaningful questions, ask 'why', and close your mouth every now and then. One last note, this may seem like I'm asking you to talk about personal stuff a bit too much. That's because there's one more thing. Enjoy yourself! Goof it up a bit, mix things up, have a ball, but remember that you also want to figure things out about her."

This and the next letter are the easiest my daughter has given me. I easily do both in the span of a week. The second one asks me to plan out the conversation so that we talk about a mutual interest that also makes for a great date idea. If you talk about the date during the whole initial conversation, naturally you should go on it. It hardly seems like a date at that point. It's just doing that thing you talked about doing.

When two weeks have passed I go into the attic once more to open the box. I take in the box before opening it, appreciating the craftsmanship and once more wondering whether it is made by my daughter's hands. I take the time to enjoy it because I'm delaying.

In the box is the last instructional letter. There are three in total. I have a guess what the second to last is, but not what the very last contains. I do know what the one I will read today talks about, and I'm dreading opening it.

07/03/2014

“Father, as I have said before, you have done wonderfully. You have become healthy, gained a fun lifestyle with multiple hobbies, and gained confidence and skill in the art of talking to girls. You just have one last thing on my list to do. It’s just one thing, but I won’t help you with this.”

“See, I can’t fix this for you. I could figure out how. Like so many other things I have told you. I could find the precise words and acts necessary to do what needs to be done. I could craft the ideal plan and outline it for you that you can resolve the matter, but that would destroy the meaning of what I’m about to ask.”

“Father it’s been weeks since you’ve talked to your siblings. Every last one of them is hurting and needs your support. I want you to fix your relationships with them. This is the last thing you need to do father, and then, we will bring this period to a close. I’ll be waiting for you dad. Show me you can take care of your family.”

So my siblings were in pain. It hurt that I didn’t know that. They all seemed to do well. Ever since I had missed out on my little sister breaking up with her boyfriend I had been checking their Facebook pages pretty regularly in order to insure I was up to date with all of their information. They had all done well in school. My two brothers were active in summer sports, and my sister was having a blast preparing for college, what could be wrong with them?

I decide to call Grace first. She’s the one I’ve spent time with most recently, and it would be easiest to talk to her. I already know we can discuss dancing. I could invite myself over, and we could dance, then talk about my other siblings in detail.

I dial the number, and she picks up halfway through the first ring. I don’t even get a chance to say hello. She starts talking as soon as she answers the call.

“Our youngest brother has run away.”

Chapter 5

“What do you mean run away? When did this happen?” I ask in disbelief.

“I mean he’s not here. I don’t know where he is, and I’m scared.” Her voice is shaking.

“Okay, what are the parents doing?” I ask, trying to wrap my head around what’s going on.

“The parents are on a plane to Ireland. They left this morning and won’t be on the ground for another six hours. Brother, I’m scared.” She’s repeating herself. She’s freaked out.

“I know sis. Stay there, I’m coming over right now. Get our other younger brother and sit down in the kitchen. I’ll be there as soon as I can.” Sundown is in an hour. We will have to move quickly to find him. I wish I had known about this before spending most of my time after I got home from my job working on dropping the lines.

I make the nearly one hour drive in thirty minutes, running several stop signs, red lights, and exceeding the speed limit by a very wide margin that has me dodging in and out of traffic. I probably wrack up a couple hundred dollars in tickets from red light cameras and speeding cameras, but by some miracle no cop pulls me over. I blaze into the driveway of my parent’s house and blitz inside.

My sister is red eyed with several used tissues in front of her. My brother is sitting across from her twiddling with his thumbs. Upon seeing me enter my sister runs over and hugs me.

"I don't know where he went. I was making dinner, and wanted a hand chopping some vegetables up, so I called him, and he didn't answer. I tried several times and he wouldn't respond so I looked all through the house, thinking he had headphones on, and he wasn't anywhere. I tried calling his phone and I found out he left it behind in his room." He left his cell phone behind. He must really be trying to avoid us. "I called James, thinking he might be hanging out with him, but he said he hasn't seen little Andy all day. I don't know when he left or how long he's been gone."

"Did Andy say anything to you today? Has he been upset at you or someone else?" My sister pulls away from me and shakes her head. Her nose is starting to drip.

"I didn't know anything. We don't talk much, but he seemed perfectly happy."

"Alright sis, it's going to be okay. Come on, have a seat and we're going to sort this thing out." I pull her chair out for her, and then sit down next to her to talk.

"James." I address my younger brother who hasn't gotten himself lost. "Did you notice anything strange about Andy? Has he been complaining about something in particular, or talking about something excessively?" James shakes his head.

"I haven't talked to him much recently either, but when I did he seemed perfectly happy. Maybe mom and dad said something to him that set him off." This isn't much help.

"Guys, I'm not around much. If I don't know something about what's going on I can't be of any help. You're telling me you have absolutely no idea why he would do this?" I ask.

"He complained about the food around here a few days ago." James says. "That's literally the last thing I remember him saying."

"It wasn't my cooking." Grace said defensively.

"No one is making any accusations. We're just trying to get the facts straight." I tell Grace. "You guys really have no clue why this would happen?" They both shake their heads. Clearly our family has communication issues. No one knew what was going on with anyone else, even the people who lived in the same house together. I felt slightly better for not being involved in their lives. None of us were involved in each other's lives.

"Alright, we've got to try and find him. Can either of you drive?" I feel like a horrible person for not even knowing if my own siblings can drive. They both shake their heads again.

"Okay, that's going to make things harder. Grace, you stay here in case he comes back. You can also call people to try and get information. James, you come with me."

"Who should I call?" Grace asks.

"Friends, neighbors, anyone, just call anyone who might know something or might have seen him. Let them know we're looking for him. At the very least having more eyes looking out for him is going to help." Grace is still red eyed and drippy nosed.

"It's going to be okay Grace." I tell her, putting an arm around her shoulder. "We're going to find him. If we don't hear anything by sundown we will call the police and get them in on the search." Grace nods her head.

"Okay." She says. "Thank you for coming big brother."

"Hey, anything for my siblings." I say, ruffling her hair affectionately.

"We will be back to check in with you in an hour." I pat her on the back and stand up. "Let's go James." I tell my remaining younger brother. The two of us head to my car and begin cruising the neighborhood.

"Do you know where he might go?" I ask James as we pull out.

"I don't know man. He could be anywhere." James dejectedly stares out his window.

"No he can't." I respond. "He's got two legs, not much money, and no car. Does he have a bike?" I ask.

"No." James says.

"Then he could only go so far. Besides. He's probably not just going to run randomly. He's smart right?" I hate that I have to ask if my own brother is smart.

"Yes." James replies.

"Then he's got a plan. We just need to figure out what his plan is, and we can find him. Now, he might run to someplace he's familiar with. He's got to be upset about something. Maybe he went to his 'happy place', so to speak. What I need from you, is where that might be." James still looked out his window. He must be a big introvert.

"Come on James, I know you guys didn't talk much, none of us did, but any information at all you can tell me about where he liked to go would help. Where were his stomping grounds? Where does he feel safe?" James pulls himself away from the window.

"I'll start with the first one. He was good at school right? I see him posting about contests he's won, teams he's made it onto, and good grades he's gotten." The good grades were a little insensitive of him to be putting online, but I took it Andy had not yet mastered the social graces. "So let's go to his school. You guys go to the same school don't you? Can you show me how to get to it?"

"I'm in high school and he's in middle school." James says. Yet another instance of me not knowing anything about my brothers or sister. I want to give myself a by because I'm old enough that I don't really remember how old high schoolers and middle schoolers are. I know how old he is, but I don't remember what age equals what grade anymore. "But I know where his school is, make a left here."

Our parents live several miles outside of town, it takes eight minutes of precious daylight to navigate to the school. I drop James off at the front.

"You wander through the grounds." I order James. "See if you can find anything. I'm going to take a slow loop around the school in the car and see if I can spot him that way." I start to pull away when James asks.

"What do I do if I see him?" I hadn't thought that far in advance, and I think quickly to come up with the answer.

"He's scared and maybe angry. As much as I hate to say this, treat him like a wild animal. He could bolt, or he could charge you. Approach him slowly, and in as non-threatening a way as you can. Then tell him it's okay. Tell him he can come home."

"Okay, I will, thanks big brother." James calls as he hops a chain link fence onto the school grounds.

"Hurry!" I shout after him. I can see him start to bolt across the school as I pull away.

I can't imagine what would cause a kid like Andy to run away. He had everything going for him. His scholastics were outstanding. He must have glowing support from the parents. At least, I think he did. He had run away right as they had left. Could it be something the parents said? Or could it be something else.

The parents had left, and then he had. Was it because he felt abandoned? But how could he feel abandoned. He had three great siblings. Grace had been cooking a meal for him. I remember Grace's cooking. It was top notch. He was in for a treat. Then he had two brothers. James had been good to him; well actually, I think James had been off somewhere else. The way Grace told the story it had sounded like she had been alone, and had to call James to her. Then there was me. I was never around. Could this be my fault? Had I so blotted out my family life that I had alienated my own sibling into doing something reckless and stupid?

I don't see Andy anywhere. I finish my loop and meet James back in front of the school. He's sweating hard. He must've been sprinting the whole time.

"Did you see him?" Andy isn't with James, but maybe he had run off and was coming to get me so we could follow in the car.

"I didn't see anything. If he's here, I don't know where he could be."

"That's okay. We still have a bit of daylight left. Get in. Have you thought of anywhere else he might go?" I ask James.

"Yeah actually." James enters the shotgun seat. "Make a right up here." We speed off.

"He used to go to the ice skating rink a lot." James tells me.

"Ice skating?" I say in disbelief. "It's the middle of the summer, where is he going to go ice skating?"

"At an indoor ice skating rink, it's a left at the next light." James says.

"We have an indoor ice skating rink?" I ask in disbelief. "When did we get one of those?"

“Four summers ago, after the winter Olympics.” James replies.

“I didn’t know Andy was an ice skater. How come he never posts about it?” James shrugs.

“I’m not really sure. Maybe because nobody knows he does it. I’ll bet when he goes there no one knows him for being really smart or popular, they just know him as a fellow ice skater. Andy gets a lot of attention, and I don’t think he likes it. He gets to escape all the people trying to talk to him here.”

I’m learning so much about my siblings on this drive. I pull into a parking space quick enough that James involuntarily slams his feet against the floor of the car in the hope that he will hit an imaginary brake pedal.

We both run inside to the front desk.

“Have you seen a little kid about so high?” I ask the lady at the desk, and hold up my hand to show my estimation of Andy’s height.

“More like this height.” James hold up a hand to contradict my own estimation. Andy has grown a lot since last I talked to him.

“Brown hair, he goes by Andy.” I add on to James’ statement.

“Oh yeah, Andy.” The lady says. We both get a glimmer of hope in our eyes. “I haven’t seen him in three weeks. He normally doesn’t come here a lot during the summer. It’s too crowded he says.” I ball my hand into a fist and have to resist slamming it into the counter.

“Thank you.” I manage to get out, and grab James to leave.

“Anywhere else?” I ask. “We’ve got enough daylight left to check maybe one more place. I’m going to make a loop around the parking lot, but I need to know where else he might go.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” James says as we both slide into the car. “There’s one more place. I don’t know if he still goes there, but Andy used to really like the local church. You know how the parents make us go? He sticks around a lot afterwards and just sits. I don’t know why, but he likes it.”

“The church with the stain glass window of the guy crossing a river with a lamb on his back?” I ask James as I complete my lap around the parking lot.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” James says.

“Great, hold on.” I run two red lights in order to get there before sundown, but I make it. James goes off running around the church to see if he’s sitting on one of the benches outside. I make my way inside.

Inside the church is empty, no Andy. I walk quickly to the back of the church to check the rooms behind the alter. I whisper Andy’s name into both of the rooms, no response. I should have run through and yelled his name, but somehow it didn’t feel right doing that in a church. It’s so quiet and serene I don’t want to be the pebble that disturbs the pond, even if there’s no one here.

I head back outside and meet James.

“Tell me you found him.” I say to James. He has to have found him. This is the last place we can afford to look. The sun is going down. Grace hasn’t called to tell us he returned home. We’ve got maybe two minutes of daylight left. He has to be here.

“Sorry.” James says. “I got nothing.” I do punch the door to the church. He was supposed to be here. It was the last place we could look. Why would he not be here? I want to punch the door again, but I have to pull it together for James.

“That’s okay. We will go home and get the professionals on this. If we can’t find him they can.” I say, but I should’ve been the one to find him. I’m his older brother. It’s my job to take care of him, and in failing to find him I’ve failed as an older brother. I’m sure Sarah is watching, and it hurts that much more knowing I’ve disappointed her as well.

We pile into the car at a normal walking pace, and head home obeying all traffic laws.

“It’ll be okay.” I tell James again. He doesn’t say anything back.

It’s a full ten minute drive home, and the sunset punctuates our failure. The last rays are just fading in the distance, signaling that our attempt to find him has reached its end. We are forced to give in. Everything closes at dusk around here, and the lack of daylight will prevent us from seeing him.

As I turn into our parent’s neighborhood, I see a kid walking up the side of the road with reflective tape all over his shirt. He looks about the same height as James had estimated Andy would be.

“James.” I say, keeping my voice calm as we pull alongside him. “Is that?”

“Andy!” James shouts, opening the car door. I slam on the brakes and put the car in park in the middle of the street.

We both ignore my advice to be deal with Andy cautiously, and rush out of the car to bear hug him before he can get away.

“He gu...” He gets out before I pick him up and crush his lungs, before handing him over to James to do the same.

I spot a plastic bag on the ground. It’s got food in it. He had been getting supplies. I pick up the bag and toss it aside.

“It’s okay Andy.” I say while James still has him in a bear hug. “You won’t be needing supplies. We are going to take you home and feed you. Grace has been preparing a hero’s dinner at home. Whatever it is that made you run away. We can fix it. We are here for you now Andy.”

James puts Andy down, and it is at this point I see the highly confused and surprised look on Andy’s face.

“Run away?” He asks. “Who ran away?”

His question caught me off guard. “You did Andy.” I say. “You’ve been gone. Your sister is horribly worried, and you’ve picked up supplies for your escape.”

“Escape?” Andy says. James is starting to examine the blades of grass by the sidewalk in an attempt to distance himself from the conversation.

“I wasn’t trying to escape. Those ‘supplies’ were snacks the parents don’t let me eat.” I look in the back. It’s full of soda, chips, candy, and other stuff that parents try to avoid feeding to their kids.

“Well um, I guess it is. Hang on though, you left your cell phone behind. You left without telling anyone, and you were gone for hours.” I think he might be just trying to cover his tracks now that he knows he’s been caught.

“I left my cell phone behind because I hate people texting and calling me all the time.” Andy says.

“You could’ve just turned it off.” I suggest.

“It feels more liberating to leave it behind.” He says. “As for the leaving without telling and being gone for hours, I was only gone for two hours, because that’s how long it takes to walk to the store and back, and I didn’t tell anyone because none of you guys ever take an interest in what I do.” He says.

Those words hit home. I see James feel them too. Me and James are both in the same boat, Grace too. We are all his older siblings. It’s not his responsibility for him to keep up with us. It’s our responsibility to keep up with him.

“I think we’ve learned our lesson Andy.” I tell him. “We’ve been worried sick over you. Let’s all go home and sort this out.” It’s a silent car ride up the street to the parent’s.

Upon our arrival Andy calls out for Grace. She comes streaking into the room to give Andy his third attempted asphyxiation through hugging of the day. Andy handles it well.

“How did you find him? Where was he?” Grace asks.

“We’ve got to have a talk Grace.” I say. “Let’s meet in the dining room. There are some things we need to go over.” Grace catches the somber tone in my voice. She nods, thinking she understands what’s going on. She puts on arm around Andy.

Once we are all seated around the dining room table, I start off.

“First things first, Grace, Andy didn’t run away. He was walking to the store to pick up some junk food now that the parents were gone.” I produce the bag, and Grace looks appropriately shocked. “We all over reacted. He wasn’t gone long, and we had no reason to believe he had run away. That’s our fault. Thankfully we kept our heads enough that this will probably not get back to the parents. If they find out we are this badly coordinated and irresponsible it won’t end well for any of us. I’m out of the house so there isn’t a lot they can do to me, but I’m sure you guys are going to get the world’s biggest grounding. To make sure it doesn’t get back, we are all going to go through our phones and call back everyone we told about this to let them know it’s okay, and Andy didn’t run away. It was all just a misunderstanding. Hopefully, that will be enough.” Grace looks crestfallen. I’m sure she made many calls, and will now have to make many more. It would be good for us. We needed a little negative reinforcement after what we had done.

“Second, Andy, we are sorry.” James knows why I’m apologizing, but Grace’s face is asking me why I’m apologizing. “All of us are sorry. You didn’t know we cared enough to check up on you, so you didn’t think it necessary to tell us where you were going or when you would be back. Ultimately, this whole episode is our fault. So Andy, I am very sorry that I haven’t been the big brother you deserve.” I pause and look at James.

“I’m sorry too Andy. I should’ve kept in touch better.” James says.

“Me too Andy, I’m sorry I haven’t been a good older sister.” Grace says.

“I’m sorry too.” Andy says. “I haven’t been an enthusiastic supportive younger brother either. I can’t blame you guys for not talking to me. I haven’t talked to you either.”

“It’s good of you to say that Andy.” I say. “That brings us to the third order of business, making sure this doesn’t happen again. I think we can all agree, and this event has made it perfectly clear, we have all been pretty awful siblings too each other. We don’t fight, but that’s only because we don’t interact enough to have a reason to fight. We need to resolve to keep in touch better, and to start us off, I’m going to take us on a little adventure. Brothers and sister, we are going rock climbing tomorrow.”

What follows is an eager exchange between the four of us as we go over every detail with fervor. They want to know where we are going and how we are going to do it. I enjoy sharing my new hobby with my siblings.

I take them back to my place for the night, and setup a campfire outside. We make use of the marshmallows and chocolate that Andy bought to make s’mores. I feel, right, like this is how things are supposed to be, my younger siblings are at my house, using the fire I made, sleeping outside with my gear. I can’t wait until tomorrow where I can get to teach them new stuff, but I love our conversation around the fire.

James finally opens up after being tight lipped all day.

“I just don’t get it.” He says. “None of the sophomore girls seem to take an interest in me. I’m smart. I’m funny. I have a lot going on for me at school, but that doesn’t seem to matter to them.” He addressed his statement to Grace. No doubt hoping she could volunteer some helpful information, but I answered for her.

“Little bro, you’ve come to the right place.” I start my older brother job of teaching the younger ones the ways of life a little sooner than I expected.

The next day I wake them up with surprise cinnamon rolls and chocolate milk that I slipped out of the house to buy. They are ecstatic at the unexpected treats, and I tell them to eat them on the way, we are heading out to the rocks immediately.

On the way out we play old car games like ‘I spy’ and ‘Twenty Questions’. Andy is annoyingly good at picking very specific species of animals that no one knows, and James goes for a bunch of older historical figures that I haven’t heard of, but Grace knows every last one. I am without a doubt the worst at the game, trying to select animals that I think are cool is a rather poor strategy it turns out.

When we get to the cliff I have them inspect the gear I've brought, making sure the ropes aren't frayed, and none of the metal bits have telltale scratches or dents on them. We have a safety talk about what we are about to do, and they help me set up the rope systems.

I've done trust falls before. They are a good group exercise where each person takes a turn falling into another person's arms. I had thought it was good for group cohesion because there is genuine tension when you trust someone else to catch you. This is nothing compared to leaning backwards off of a cliff because someone told you too.

We spend the afternoon moving up and down the cliff face. During the intermissions between climbs I discuss college plans with Grace, date ideas with James, and book plots with Andy. When the sun sets we head back to my place to call the parents. They're happy to see us hanging out together, and as we sit around the night's campfire we make plans to keep in touch. Come hell or high water at 5:00 on Sundays we will all be in front of a computer screen to have a skype chat.

The next day when I drop them off I realize I've hardly thought of Sarah in two days, and I've got five whole days before her next letter. I spend them with my family, insuring that the bond we have started to form becomes stronger. It's not only what Sarah would want me to do, it's the right thing to do.

Five days later I find myself making my way to the attic to retrieve one of the final three letters. I hope this is the letter where I get to meet my future wife. The next letter is three months off. The final letter is over three years off. I have plenty of things to occupy myself with, but I can't help but wonder about my wife. She's out there somewhere. Is she talking to guys and hanging out with family? Are there people making her life hard? I want to read her letters and compare them to my own. I open the box and pull out the sixteenth letter. Please tell me where she is.

07/10/2014

"Hey dad, wow, this is so weird talking to you. I mean I haven't talked to you in months and now here I am, communicating with you. Wow, I can communicate with you whenever I want now." What? Was there some mix up, this letter sounded like it was the first time we had spoken. Had my daughter's, until now, perfectly formed plan suddenly developed a hole? Had she gotten cocky and forgot to double check her work?

"I know that this is going to be one of the last letters you read, but it's the first one I'm writing." That didn't make any sense at all. Who would start an 18 letter series with the sixteenth letter? *"I know that's confusing, but it's because I wanted to say this first. All of the other letters are going to be edited and sent countless times as I go back and forth through time again and again to get everything just right for you and make you into the man I know you can be."*

“That’s the reason I’m writing this letter first. I don’t want what I’m about to say to be tainted by knowledge of the future. I haven’t gone back in time to see you yet, and I have no proof for how these letters will change your life, so you know that what I’m about to say is based on faith, and faith alone.”

“Thank you dad, it’s been a long journey for you. You have fought so hard for so long to change the things about you that are dead weight. You have ruthlessly cut out the parts of you that damage your life, and carefully grown new parts that give life to you and all those around you. You have become a pillar of strength, the cornerstone of your siblings. You have taken charge of your life, and helped to guide the lives of those around you. You’ve made yourself into the person that mom and I need and desire. You have become a true prince charming that saves the princess and protects his kingdom from invaders. I am proud to call myself your daughter. I know in good times and in bad our family can rely on you. You make us safe, secure, and loved. Thank you for being who you are.”

Love always,

Sarah

The first letter, this was her first letter. This was written without the knowledge that multiple trips to the past provided. All of her other instructions had been based on her experience and what she had seen. She must’ve traveled back countless times to make all this happen. She had done all of this for me, and she had known I could do it. From the very start she had known that her father was a man capable of doing incredible things, and she had empowered me to do them. I owed her so much. I would have to spend a lifetime paying it back to her. This letter I do not put back in the box. I fold it carefully, and put in the back of my wallet.

During the next three months I read it often. I honor her by keeping to the habits she has taught me. I continue to broaden my outdoors knowledge, develop into even better shape, grow closer to my family, and become more and more confident with the opposite gender. I wait dutifully for the right time to open the second to last letter, with the letter in my wallet it’s easy to find the strength to hold off opening it.

What could the last two letters be? Clearly one is to setup a meeting with my future wife, but what of the other? She had finished with her purpose of making me into a better human being, what else was there to do besides meet my wife?

Was there some dark thing that would happen on one of those days? She had written letters before with the purpose of encouraging me, or steering me back onto the straight and narrow path when I strayed off it. Was I going to slip somehow? Would I meet someone else and begin dating a woman who wasn’t my wife? I begin to be anxious about the approaching final letter. One of them is going to be bear good news, but I begin to fear the second. What else could it be but bad news? And it would truly be a dark day. There were no more letters for me. This event must be the worst event in my life to be the only thing from now until my daughter began time traveling that was bad enough to warrant some outside support.

The day finally arrives. After seven months, this could be the end. This could be it. I could read my wife's name, and begin to date her. We would finally meet after seven months of toil and strife. I could not wait to hear the trials she had endured.

Or, it could be my darkest day. I drive to work using back roads to avoid traffic and any potentially horrible accidents. I do nothing at work for four hours, afraid that my slightest action would somehow get me fired or cause permanent injury, and then I think they might fire me because I'm not doing anything. So I spend another four hours writing emails that don't need to be written so it looks like I'm doing something.

I jump every time my cell phone goes off, afraid it could be delivering bad news. I open every text message slowly, bracing myself for the worst. It's time to leave work, and still nothing has happened. I practically tip toe out of the building, and for the first time in my life, drive below the speed limit on the back roads home.

At my home I make my dinner while carefully inspecting each and every item to insure it is still in good condition, and free of any mold or impurity that could potentially damage my health.

After dinner I don't make a fire. I just set in my living room, with my largest kitchen knife in my lap. The TV is off. My phone is on, but I don't use it, and all other electronic devices are off. I glance anxiously from door to door, waiting for someone to break in, or a fire to start, or a bomb to go off. I glance down at my cell phone every now and then to check for messages, but it's silent the whole night.

When the clock reads 11:40, I decide to head up to the attic. I walk slowly through the house, checking every corner and frequently looking behind me to make sure nothing has gotten in and begun following me. I reach the attic after the slowest most agonizing walk through my house I have ever taken. It was worse than watching a horror movie by yourself, in the dark, and then walking around your house alone.

I scan the attic for anything out of place that could signal an intruder, and then locate the chest. It's in tact, just the way I left it. I put my back to a wall and keep the attic entrance in the corner of my eye as I open the box and pull out the seventeenth letter.

I pray fervently as I open it. I'm not out of the woods yet. This letter could be instructions for how to survive a disaster that occurred immediately afterwards, or could describe a horrible situation as it unfolds. I open the letter and begin to read.

10/17/2014

"Dear dad, her name is Angelica."

Chapter 6

"She's wonderful. You couldn't ask for a better girl dad. Her hair is long and flowing. It's the color of chocolate. Her eyes are the color of the sky on a clear summer's day. She's elegant, funny, smart, and

beautiful. Her voice could charm the birds from the trees, and her smile could tame a wild bear. She's perfect, and she's perfect for you. You are going to marry a princess dad."

It's over. It's finally over. I've done it. Now I get to meet her. I get to meet a girl and instantly know it's meant to be. No stressing over tiny faults that you don't know if you can live with. No doubting how she feels. This is for real, and this is happening.

"I don't really need to tell you what to do. You could sweep her off her feet all on your own. So I'll just say you have needed to learn to man up and become strong enough for her. She's needed to learn to let go. Help her let go dad." Cryptic, as usual for my daughter, but I kind of preferred it that way. I wanted to figure this out partly on my own, and I could craft a date for her that she would never forget.

"Now for the goods. You've done your job dad. You've come to the end of the journey, and now it's time to reap the rewards. There's a bridge in the regional park that crosses a large stream. She will be there at 1:00 tomorrow. Sweep her off her feet dad. You have a golden opportunity. You know for certain that this woman is going to be your wife. Use that knowledge, don't hold back. Make this moment worth all the struggle." No pressure, but that was okay. I could do this. This is what I've been working to achieve. I have a date, a time, and a general description. This is going to happen. It's actually going to happen. I begin planning what I'm going to do as I continue to read.

"I hate to tarnish such a happy moment, but because this is where you and your wife start, it's time for me to step away. Our family is going to start in about thirteen hours, and I can't be there to make it happen. That is for you to do, and it is for me to leave you to do it." I notice there are some watermarks on the letter. This wasn't easy for her to write.

"If only you knew how many letters I've written you. These were the final drafts. I cannot tell you how many times I had to travel back and amend something because it turned sour later on. You know all those times it felt like I was reading your mind? I had to write the letter, send it, wait for you to read it, and then come up and ask you about it. You were so surprised whenever I talked to you. You hit your head on the attic rafters so many times when I made you jump. I have had to travel back and forth so many times for this, and now this is it, the final letter. So much time, so much energy, and now it's all done." She had to have dozens of instances in the letters where she had seemed to be reading my thoughts. She had to come back hundreds of times at least, and for my wife too no doubt.

"I'm actually really terrible at goodbyes. I thought this one would be better because it's not in person, but it's not. I'm trying to think of more stuff to say just so I don't have to stop writing. I shouldn't though. I need to not drag this out. You've got to go to bed so you can be bright eyed and bushy tailed for your wife tomorrow. Okay, it's okay. I'll see you in three years dad. Love her like crazy. Go make a family."

I felt like I had lost a friend. Whenever things had gotten hard she had been there for me. She had made me smile with her little games, and made me smile when I couldn't make myself feel better. No one had ever made me feel wanted and special like she had. Now she was gone. I didn't know what that last letter held, but I wouldn't know for three years. A lot could happen in three years. Maybe the letter would be a short thank you. She had written those before, or maybe some tiny little advice to set me straight with something. Maybe it would be a full letter like this one. I didn't know, it didn't change the way I felt.

It hits me just how much effort she has put into this. She has come back so often, and she must've always been watching from the shadows. She kept a careful eye on me to know just what I needed to hear, and when I needed to hear it. This was a labor of love that trumped anything else that I had experienced.

I remember the other letter in my wallet. I want to trade it out and put this one in instead, but that wouldn't be right. This letter was meant to be a goodbye. Goodbye meant you went your own way. It wasn't good to dwell on the past. I would keep her uplifting forward looking letter in my pocket, and put this one back in the chest.

After I stow the letter I stand up and exhale. The punchline has been told. The story has had its ending, now it's time to move on. I'll always carry the memory of what she's done for me.

The bridge that I'm going to meet my future wife on is a mile down the trail from the parking lot, and the walk gives me time to appreciate the scenery. The park is a forest that borders on a lake. The trail wraps through the woods alongside the lake, and affords a view of the sparkling water. The sun is reflecting off the water in such a way that makes it seem as if there is treasure at the bottom of the lake that is glinting in the afternoon sunlight. The water is calm, with a family or two of ducks lazily cruising across it.

The trees are splashed with autumn colors. There are deep reds, bright oranges, and dark greens throughout. Squirrels dart among the branches, some male squirrels are chasing female squirrels, subtly reminding me of why I'm here.

The path runs into the creek, and runs parallel next to it down to where it reaches the bridge. The stream isn't deep. It's shallow enough to wade across. There are numerous large stones in it that suggest it's possible to walk across without getting your feet wet, but it would be a risky endeavor.

At last I see the bridge in the distance. It's a plain wooden bridge that arches majestically over the running waters. On it is a lone figure, facing away from me. I can see long dark brown hair on this figure. It's her.

I walk to the bridge reverently, as if I'm in a church. There is a tension in the air. A magic that has been building since I set foot on the path. Now it is coalescing into something special, and I dare not make any sudden move for fear of dissipating that magic.

If she hears me coming she gives no sign, and I stop at the foot of the bridge.

"Are you ready to begin forever?" I ask her.

She turns around, and I stop breathing. The sun is shining through a gap in the trees, and it lights up her face. She almost seems to glow in the golden beams, and everything Sarah said was true. Her smile could stop a wild boar's charge, and right now she is smiling for all she's worth.

Wordlessly, she runs to me and leaps into my arms. I catch her in an arm chair, and spin her round and round. She wraps her hands around my neck and I see that her eyes are like clear blue Caribbean water. It's fitting, this girl seems to be the living embodiment of the warmth and light of a Caribbean beach.

"Angelica." I say. Her name flows off my tongue like honey.

"I'm ready." She tells me.

"Then let's get started princess." I'm highly thankful for all my exercise. She's light as a feather in my arms, and I can easily carry her most of the way back to my car.

"There's so much I want to talk about." She tells me.

"Let's start with Sarah." I suggest.

"Our daughter." She confirms. "So you got the letters too?" She asks.

"All eighteen of them. It took me seven months to go through them."

"Same here. I got twenty-two letters, but they took me the same time to go through."

"It was a heck of a thing to go through that." I say. "So many new skills to learn."

"Skills?" She asks. "Mine were mostly about dealing with old baggage. So many people who hurt me, and letting the hurt go. There was a little bit of learning, but mostly it was dealing with emotions."

"I guess we had different issues to resolve."

"So what kind of skills did you work on?" My future wife asks.

"A bunch of stuff, some of it suggested by her, some of it was on my own initiative." I open my mouth to tell her what they were, then I get an evil idea. "But you'll have to find out what those are later. We're going to take part in some right now, and I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise. Did Sarah tell you that I would help you let go?" I ask.

"Yes, she said you would help me loosen my grip on my past." I want to borrow my daughter's time travel so I can go back and fix whatever has scarred my wife. I had physical traits that had needed fixing, but she had emotional ones. I did not envy her for the path she had to walk these last seven months.

"Well. We are about to get a jump on that. Are you afraid of heights?" She nods. "What about the dark?" She nods. "Perfect." I say.

"That's rather vague and not exactly comforting." She tells me.

"Sarah taught me how to speak like that." I respond. "Speaking of Sarah, she also taught me how to do this whole courtship thing. On that note, I've got a question for you. You get three wishes, but you can't wish for anything that you could buy or sell, and you can't wish for anything generous. These wishes have to be about you, and for things without any monetary values." She tilts her head back.

"That's a tough one. What would you wish for?" She asks back.

"Oh no, you're not getting off that easily. I don't want to contaminate your way of thinking with my wishes. I want to know you Angelica, all of you. So tell me what you would wish for."

"Well, that's a little hard, because Sarah and you have already given me so much that I want. I guess I would wish to be able to help her when she time travels. Go with her and try to alleviate some of

the work load. She did so much for us that I would want to give some back. Is that a bad wish?" She asks.

"Not at all." I say.

"Okay, then my second wish would be to help you during your journey. I know it wasn't easy for you, and I want to go back and help you along in whatever way I can. Too cheesy?" She asks.

"No such thing." I tell her.

"Good, then my last wish is that this is going to work between us. So that Sarah doesn't have to go back in time and fix things again, and the three of us can just be together."

"I gave you three wishes." I say. "And you managed to wish for three things that would help others."

"I know, that violates one of the rules you gave me." She says.

"No, no, it's good, because I know that's what you want. I didn't say that it couldn't help others, just that it had to be about you. Sarah did a great job with your personality babe." I tell her.

"She didn't do so bad with you either. You carried us all the way back to my car." She exclaims.

"I have been working out a little." I humble brag. I put her down and open her door for her. She curtsies, gets in, and we drive off.

"Where are we going?" She asks excitedly, like a little kid trying to find out what they got for Christmas.

"Someplace I found while I was out exploring the woods." I say.

"That's not helpful." She said.

"You wouldn't want me to spoil the surprise would you? Come on this is exactly how Sarah talks to us in our letters. She can't be here physically for this event, so I thought I'd make her a part of it spiritually."

"That's sweet." Angelica says. "But that's not how Sarah talked to me."

"Really?" I say. "She always had this super playful attitude with me. We were always trying to outwit each other with mind games. She would challenge me to do stuff and would always give me these hard deadlines and powerful hard hitting words to motivate me, with just the right mix of support to keep me going." I wish she could be here for this. This is her great reward, and she's not here for it. I am glad to have someone to talk to about Sarah. Marriage fixing daughters who time travel were not a common topic of conversation at the office.

"That's not at all how Sarah talked to me." My future wife responds. "With me they were very long very emotional letters that helped explain why things were the way they were, and why they had to change. She would validate my emotions and explain why things happened the way they did, or apologized that they went badly. She was my shoulder to cry on, and her gift to me was her understanding. We slowly worked through all of my baggage and helped me to find closure with how

things were in my life. She helped me to make a clean emotional slate so you could come along and fill my life.”

“She’s even more amazing than I thought.” I say. “For me she was a motivational speaker and a coach. For you she was a friend and a confidant. I thought she just happened to have a personality that fit well with mine, but she’s complicated and flexible enough to not only give me what I need, but what you need as well.”

“That’s our girl.” Angelica says.

“Our girl.” I echo. “That’s weird to say isn’t it?” Angelica nods.

“But she is our girl, or will be. I’m not sure what the proper grammar is for people who exist in multiple places in time simultaneously, or actually I guess she doesn’t exist yet.”

“It’s so profoundly confusing.” I say. “Let me back up to something you said earlier. You confirmed for me that Sarah told you I would help you let go of this emotional stuff right?”

“That’s right.” Angelica says. “You would help me to move on.”

“That’s also different from me, because I’m at the end of my path. I’m done. She already told me in her letter that I’m what I need to be, but you’re not finished yet.”

“I guess she knew that somewhere deep down every princess wants to be rescued by a prince charming, so she left just enough baggage for you to rescue me from.”

“She’s got to be a psychologist or something.” I say. “We’re here, and I think you’ll find that I took our daughters advice to help you ‘let go’ a bit literally.”

I grab a couple duffle bags full of gear, and a short hike later we are on the edge of a wide hole that goes down about four stories.

“You can’t really see from up here.” I tell Angelica. “But there’s a cave at this bottom of this hole. We are going to rappel down into it and then make our way through the cave.”

“I’m sorry; we’re going to do what to get down into this hole?” Angelica asks.

“Rappel.” I say. “You’re going to put on a harness. We are going to run some rope through it. I’m going to tie that rope to a tree, and then I’m going to lower you down.”

“I’m going to have to fall down into this hole.” She surmised.

“At a controlled rate, but yes.” I say.

“I have a thing with heights.” She says. “I mean is there another entrance? Could we walk down? I’m really not comfortable doing this kind of thing, and like, have you done this before?”

“Yes.” I reply.

“With this specific cave?” She asks.

“You know what sweetie.” I drop the duffle bags, and tilt her chin up. I then grab both of her hands and squeeze hard enough that it’s almost uncomfortable. I maintain fierce eye contact with her and make sure my face shows the full weight of my words.

“This isn’t about you knowing exactly how safe or dangerous this is. This isn’t about how much experience I have, how good the gear is, how often people get into accidents about this. This is about me being the man you’re going to spend the rest of your life with.”

“I know, but could we just maybe start with something smaller?”

“Babe, I would sooner jump off that cliff without any gear on than put you in the smallest degree of danger. Our marriage is going to be built on mutual trust. Show me that trust now. I swear on my honor as a man and your future husband that I will not let you come to any harm.”

She bites her lip and nods. As quick as I can I tie the rope to the tree, put her harness on, and clip her in. Before she can change her mind I’m walking her to the side of the cliff.

“You’re going to lean back, and put your feet flat against the wall.” I tell her. “It’ll all be over in a minute.” She’s biting her lip too hard to respond. “On the count of three.” I tell her. “One, two...” I lean close to her. “I’m not them. You’re safe with me...3” She leans back, and I catch my wife.

I hear her let out a giant breath of air, and slowly let her down to the bottom. As soon as I feel slack in the rope, signaling that she has hit bottom, I grab a duffle bag, the rope, and clip myself in, practically diving over the side to reach her in time.

She’s at the bottom of the cliff with her arms wrapped around herself. She’s shaking.

“It’s okay.” I say as I hit bottom, hastily unclipping myself to wrap her in a hug. “Thank you.” I say.

“Sarah chose her words well.” She tells me. “When you said three, and I fell, it was like I was letting go of myself and falling into you.” Her face gets angry for a moment. “Don’t mess me up.” She orders.

“Never.” I respond. “Come on, we’ve got a walk to do.” I pull out a couple helmets and headlamps, and walk her to the cave entrance.

“Now there’s one more thing we’ve got to do.” I announce

“After that fall, this shouldn’t be that bad.” Angelica tells me.

“I thought you might say that.” I say, flipping on my headlamp. Angelica flips her own headlamp on.

“That’s why you’re doing in without your light on.” I reach over and flip her headlamp off. She wants to say something. She’s biting her lip and inhales sharply, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Okay, let’s go princess.” I take her hand, and we walk into the darkness.

Caves are funny places. They’re very muddy, cold, typically damp, and of course, dark. There are many fears you cannot have if you are in a cave, claustrophobia, fear of the dark, arachnophobia, fear of

snakes, you can't be a hypochondriac, or be sensitive to getting cold or muddy, because caves are cold, dark, wet, cramped, dirty places that often have snakes, spiders, and plenty of other nasty creatures. If it has haunted children's nightmares, there's at least a small chance of finding it in a cave. Fun fact, Ebola came from a cave.

I know all of this, and I know Angelica is running through these horrible scenarios in her head. She's imagining each in ever increasing detail, mixing and matching to create the maximum possible fear.

I feel none of this, and I have a way to show her what I see in a cave. I find a spot where the ceiling gets low, and we have to get on our hands and knees. Partway through this crawl space I stop and pull Angelica close. We are both curled into balls with our knees almost reaching the ceiling, our feet are braced against one wall, and our backs are shoved up against another.

"I'm going to turn my light off." I tell her, and reach out to grab her other hand. "It's going to be okay." She's still got her lip in her mouth, and doesn't respond.

The light goes out, and I feel her squeeze my hands even tighter. I don't blame her. Cave darkness is absolute. When you're on the surface there's usually some light coming from somewhere, even if it's faint. With time your eyes adjust and make use of the light. In cave darkness there is no light at all. I hold my hand up to touch my nose, and I don't see it.

It can also be very quiet. You could hear a pin drop half a football pitch away. Our breathing suddenly seems very loud now that we aren't moving. It was in this cave that I discovered that blinking makes a very slight sound. It's quiet enough that even the electric buzzing that light bulbs cause drowns it out, but in caves, you can hear yourself blink.

"There's a funny thing about being underground." I say. "Your brain is deprived of most of its primary senses. You can't see anything at all, the smell of mud is so prevalent that your brain filters it out, and you're left with smelling nothing, and it's so quiet that if you stop moving and hold your breath you could almost hear your heart beating." This does little to comfort her, but I'm not done yet.

"Your brain does an odd thing when it's deprived like this. See, your brain likes to fill in gaps in information. It's what allows you to see your blind spot. What we have done is create a blindspot, and now our brains will soon try to fill it in with all sorts of stuff." Her grip loosens slightly.

"If you just observe yourself and don't try and control it, your brain will relax and create a flow of imagination. You can play with that flow. I imagine that I'm not in a cave. I'm out under the stars. I see myself floating in a giant sea of black surrounded on all sides by tiny little points of light. I feel myself rotate around to look at all the different points." I let this image sink into her head, and her grip loosens a little more. "I now imagine us floating together in this far off space." Her grip loosens entirely, and she no longer feels afraid.

I then partake in one of the great joys of being in a cave. Many things about it like the tight spaces and the darkness can be replicated elsewhere, but I've yet to experience this thing anywhere but deep inside the earth, cave singing.

I start singing a song about flying around with someone and exploring the world. My voice reverberates through the cave. The cave walls and passages deepen my voice and add a unique quality

to it that is not quite an echo. The total lack of other sounds allows the listener to hear a vast array of subtle fluctuations in my voice that would not be audible anywhere else. Every twist of my lips or motion of my tongue is clearly heard. One can almost imagine the exact moves my mouth must be making to create the sounds.

Then my voice does something else, it begins to fill the gaps in our visual imagination. The brain has nothing to work with but my voice, so it makes my voice fill all the senses. The void where we were hovering in suddenly becomes a starlit quest of rapid flying travel through faraway places and far off wonders.

It is a song I have heard many times, and that I had memorized long before I had ever seen our daughter's letters. It depicts a journey together, with me and my future wife. That image of a journey blots out all else. Angelica turns to cuddle into me, listening to my voice. The cave is forgotten now. There are no low ceilings or muddy walls, there is just the two of us, and the adventure I am singing about.

The song winds down to a close, and silence resumes, but it is not an empty silence any longer. The images and dreams I have painted linger on, and make the dark not a veil that hides untold horrors, but a canvas on which to give life to the deep desires of the heart.

I am about to ask Angelica how she feels, but she answers me before I can ask. She answers me, with a song of her own. I had nearly forgotten Sarah's talk of my wife's angelic voice. I understand it now. It is high and clear, different from my low full voice. It rings through the tunnels and speaks of a time of waiting. Of wanting something dearly, so bad that it hurts, and of almost giving up hope.

Then the song changes when she sings of finally finding that which she's been looking for all along, and it's everything she always hoped it would be. I have never heard that song before, nor would I ever hear anyone but her sing it again, because it's her song. I don't know if she wrote it ahead of time, or was inspired to make it up now, but it's her song. No, it's our song.

The song closes, and the silence descends again. Now the darkness is alive with romantic tones. It dances with the possibility of unbound dreams that have become reality.

I still hear her voice, even though she has stopped singing and there is not so much as an echo of it. I see the movements her lips must have made, going up and down, curving to make the air she was breathing out into words.

I reach out and place a finger on her lips, feeling the softness. She has them closed, and I slide the back of my finger along them because the back is more sensitive and I wanted to feel everything about them.

I feel a finger on my lips do the same thing, tracing a line all the way around, from the top to the bottom and back again.

I put one hand on the back of her head, and another on her shoulder. I pull her towards me, and she comes. It's slow, and I can't see in the dark, but I know our eyes are closed.

Her lips come as a surprise. It's hard to gauge distance, but I suddenly feel warmth and moisture on my own lips. Her upper lip is between mine, and her lower lip wraps around my lower lip. She's soft, there is not much tension in her lips, and I match it with the strength of my own.

There in that moment, we are joined. I hear a great beast roar in my chest as everything in me says 'yes, I can protect this woman. She is mine, and I am hers'. Her softness compliments my strength as for a few precious heartbeats in time we become one.

When we part I grab her cheeks, and kiss first her forehead, and then both her cheeks. She leans her head onto my shoulder, and I wrap an arm around her waist. I don't know how long we sat there like that, but any amount of time would've been too short.

I can't think of anything poetic enough to end the moment with, but I know it's got to end because the sun might be setting, and it will be difficult to find our way back to the car in the night. I wordlessly shift my shoulder, and flip my light back on.

We both flinch and blink away after images. It felt like someone shoved the sun in our faces.

"So soon?" She asks.

"All good things must come to an end." I say. "But this thankfully isn't a complete end. We will get to do this many more times. We just have to take a brief break."

We make our way through the cave, and now it's a joyous occasion. We point out cave formations that look like our favorite movie characters, and skip rocks across the small underground ponds we find.

There are a few points where the tunnel we are walking through crosses a river, and I carry her across them so she doesn't get wet. Whenever I pick her up I bow and say "M'lady." Offering my arms.

"Thank you my knight." She responds with a British accent as she delicately sits in my arms.

We play prince and princess, pretending that these caves are filled with dragons and golden treasures. We must escape, but we must also find the treasure. I pause whenever there is a bend in the path, and feign fear as I peak around the corner to make sure the coast is clear. Playing make believe wasn't something I had done since I could count my age on my fingers, but it felt right with her. It was like being a kid again.

Angelica had entered the cave closed up with fear, and she exits it bursting with happiness, and begging to go back again.

We hike back another mile or so to my vehicle, and I think that right now everything is as it should be. Our tasks are done. I have surely made Angelica let go of whatever she was holding on to, and now we belong to each other.

Our story has reached its perfection. Then, as Angelica has her eyes closed and is just leaning me on, trusting me to guide her through the trees back to the car, I realize it's not perfect.

Everything should be perfect. Angelica is here, and both of us are falling head over heels for each other. Then why is there still a letter left?

“Angelica.” I say.

“Hmmm?” She responds.

“Did Sarah leave you any more letters?” She shakes her head.

“The last one told me to meet you here, why? Do you have a letter left?” She asks.

“Yes, and it’s for three years in the future.” I say.

“That’s strange. Do you have any idea what it could be?”

“She usually wrote to teach me something in order to make me a better person, or to comfort me in a time of sorrow.”

“Well I guess you still have one lesson left to learn.” Angelica says. Her dismissal of the other alternative does not escape my notice. She’s right though. She’s trying to tell me that that letter won’t be a part of our lives for another three years. I let it go, and she changes the subject.

We spend the rest of the day enjoying each other’s company, she cooks me dinner, and I take her home at the end of the night. For the next year we spend many days like this. We explore many new things together. I am glad to have her at my side as I lead her through adventure after adventure. She continually amazes me with her grace and beauty in all things.

She begins to hang out with my family, discussing boys with Grace, and girls with James. She tries to discuss girls with Andy, but finds that he prefers a silent game of chess or some other strategy game instead. This too she obliges, making sure to study chess strategies before she pays my family a visit.

The happiness we have is tainted only by the letter. It hangs over our relationship like a giant question mark. We spend many nights discussing what it could hold. We plan out our lives several years in advance, and begin to set our lives in order to avert any possible financial or medical crisis.

Both of us undergo rigorous testing and investigate our family trees to try and find where this mystery problem will come from. We take advanced defensive and evasive driving courses. We inspect our homes and vehicles regularly, becoming masters of maintenance and repair. We remodel our homes and upgrade our cars without ever having to consult contractors or engineers because we already know everything they could tell us.

Still, we find no answers, having explored all other possible options, Angelica finally says what I’ve been too afraid to say.

“It’s the baby.” Sarah said.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, feigning ignorance.

“We both know in about another year we’re going to marry, that leaves a little over one year until the letter. What can you think of that tends to happen a year after marriage?” Both of us had done the math early on. We had pretended that we hadn’t. We fervently pursued all other avenues which a sudden crisis would come from. We had even become responsible for our family’s home and auto repair to insure their safety as well, and both of our families were now on the same preventative diet we were.

Both of us had hoped we would find some hidden time bomb that we could avoid, or at least foresee coming. We could no longer deceive ourselves.

“It could be something sudden.” I say. “There are some tragedies that you just can’t predict.”

“We can keep lying to ourselves all we want, but do you really think the timing is a coincidence?” She asks.

I say the other thing I’ve been avoiding. “It could be you.” I say. “Childbirth is dangerous.”

“I know.” She says. “And I know what I’m getting into. After all Sarah has done for us could I really deny her this?”

“Our first child might not be her.” I say. “She doesn’t say she’s our first born in my letters, maybe our first child...” I can’t finish the sentence

It’s the first and only time we have the conversation. We write a last will and testament together, something that is very uncommon for recently married people to do, and we both try and forget the conversation.

The time flies as our relationship grows and prospers. I propose to her on a beach in the Caribbean during a family vacation. Dolphins were involved. We anxiously plan a wedding where we invite all of our friends and family together to celebrate with us.

We find each day that we are more and more a perfect match made for each other. A match made by our own daughter.

We spend our honeymoon hiking the trails of the Grand Canyon, and then spending a week on New Zealand beaches.

When we get back we set about making a home and a life together, insuring everything is perfect for the arrival of our daughter.

Sure enough, in early April, we get the news. Angelica is pregnant! We leap for joy, literally, when we get confirmation from the doctor, we proceed to run every single medical test in the book. We schedule every exam possible and run every diagnostic possible. They all come up blank. As far as we can determine, our child, and her mother, are fine.

We discover it’s a girl, and when the nurse shows us our sonogram we name her Sarah. We celebrate her arrival by reading each other’s letters. We had started to read them on the night we met, but it didn’t feel right without Sarah. Now Sarah had joined us, and we thought it was fitting that the first story we read to her was the story of how she had gotten her parents together.

We count down the days to December 25th, as it becomes clearer and clearer that Christmas is the day she will be born on. The doctors tell us a due date, but we don’t remember what it is, because we know the exact date and time our daughter will be born.

On Christmas morning we don’t open presents, we don’t sing songs. We sit in a car outside an emergency room, and wait for her contractions to start.

The instant she feels them we rush inside and demand a bed. We are shown the room, and it's the most tense set of hours of our lives. I glance from my wife, giving her assurance it's going to be okay, to the doctors to try and read some sign of how the procedure is going, to the clock to see how much longer until 7:53 PM.

We demand constant updates from the doctors as Angelica moves through the birthing process. As ever, everything goes fine. Sarah's head appears, and she's not breathing.

The doctors rush her to another room. Angelica goes hysterical and they have to sedate her.

I follow the doctors and wait outside the operating room. I can't believe it. I didn't think it would really happen. I look at the clock 7:53. I open the letter. On it there is no date, and no signature, just two words.

"Turn around."

I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn to see a nurse in blue scrubs with long brown hair and blue eyes like the sky. Just like her mother

"Hey dad." She says.

"How, what, why." I stumble through the words, trying to find the right ones.

"It's okay." She says. "I'm going to be alright." She tells me. As if on cue a baby cries in the next room. She's alive. She's breathing.

"I wouldn't have been able to help you along if I didn't live through this." She says.

"My wife." I say.

"She's fine. She'll need you when the sedatives wear off, but there's nothing wrong with her." She had appeared like an angel, just in the nick of time to ward off evil.

"Why now?" I ask. "You've never appeared before."

"Besides the obvious?" She says. "Because this is where the cycle begins."

"The cycle?" I ask.

"The cycle of time travel." She says. "I can only go back once per lifetime, and so whenever I am born again I will time travel again, so I must instruct you to hand over the letters to her, along with my notes so that she can fix the timeline and make things right between you and mom."

"You have to grow up every time? I thought time travel was like driving a car between two different locations." Sarah shakes her head.

"No, it's more like sending a manned shuttle to Mars, it's a one way trip." She informs me.

“So every single time you came back. You had to wait for years for the plan to come to fruition, and when it failed you had to hand over what went wrong to me so I could pass it on to you.” She nods. I ask the big question.

“How many times did you go back?”

“It only ever feels like I’ve been once because I’ve been working off notes from myself, but I do keep a running tally of how many times I’ve tried to make things work.”

“How many?” I ask.

“103.” She says. I’m dumbfounded.

“103.” I repeat.

“Yes.” She says. “And now it’s done. The cycle is complete. It’s time for me to go. Say hi to your daughter. You won’t see me again, but I’ll be watching. You may not see me, but I’ll always be watching.”

The End

Alternate Ending

“Sarah sweetie, tell your bothers that dinner is going to be ready in five minutes.” Mommy was calling to me from the back door.

“Okay mom.” I call back. I turn to my two younger brothers, we are building a hut out of pine needles and sticks at the edge of the forest in our backyard. We have a big backyard, you have to walk up a hill from the edge of the forest just to see the house.

“Hurry guys, we gotta finish the roof.” I say. My two younger brothers aren’t as quick as me. Timmy has only been walking for about a year, and Brian just isn’t very active. Mommy says he’s a lot like Uncle Andy.

“We don’t like the hut.” Timmy says. “We want to go inside, don’t we Brian?” Brian nods.

“Well fine, I can build the hut by myself.” I tell the boys. “Go run to mommy.” They drop their pine needles and run up to the house. Boys, who needs them. I couldn’t wait until my younger sister was old enough to talk to about boys.

“Need a hand little one?” A lady with long brown hair and an armful of pine needles asks me.

“Wow, you can carry a lot of pine needles!” I shout. “But, I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“But I’m not a stranger.” She says as she kneels down next to me and starts placing handfuls of pine needles on the fort.

“I’ve known you and your family since before you were born.” She says. “I was your mother and father’s best friend. I even introduced your mommy and daddy.” She says.

“You knew mommy and daddy before they were married?” I ask. That’s a long time ago, mommy and daddy have been married forever.

“Yes, I’ve been your mommy and daddy’s best friend for quite some time. Do you have any friends Sarah?”

“No, just my brothers.” I say.

“Then I’ll be your best friend too.” She tells me as she puts the last few pine needles on the roof.

“Sarah honey, dinner time.” My daddy calls. I can hear him shut the back door, in a minute he will walk down to us.

“Okay daddy!” I shout back. “I gotta go.” I tell mommy and daddy’s friend.

“I must go too.” Mommy and daddy’s friend says. “Until next time Sarah, give daddy this letter.” She hands me a letter. I look down to try and read it, and when I look up, my new best friend is gone.

“Hey little stinker.” My daddy says. “Nice hut you’ve built there. Did you do all that yourself?”

“No.” I say. “A lady helped me, she said to give this to you.” I hand him the letter. He opens it, and quickly reads it before folding it up and looking out into the forest.

“Always just out of sight aren’t you Sarah.” Daddy says.

“But daddy, I’m not out of sight. I’m right here.” I say, poking his leg.

Daddy looks down at me. “Why so you are Sarah, so you are.”